Merle Maxwell

Lola C. Talkington

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"Merle, Merle."

MERLE MAXWELL

A NOVEL

—BY—

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PREFACE.

I desire here to express my gratitude to those who by kind words encouraged me in the writing of this story. Especially am I indebted to my mother for helpful, encouraging words.

The inspiration of the writing of this story came to me years previous to its beginning. So without harboring malice or ill will towards humanity but with a burning desire to give to the world a message that I trust is elevating and wholesome, I attempt this writing. Should this story lift its readers to a higher conception of life I shall be glad. And with a prayer that this effort may be approved of Him who reigns Supreme this message is sent forth.

L. C. T.

Merle Maxwell

"We hear the sound of the summer breeze
  And fancy it is sighing,
And feel its touch as it whispers low
  Of the scented flowers dying."

Chapter I.

IT was the morning of a beautiful October day. The sun was shining brightly on a clear, blue sky. Mother earth was beginning to put on her autumnal robe of brown. Here and there were scattered fallen leaves of the tall, magnolia trees, while the last blossoms of the sweet cape jasamines were slowly but surely dying

Everyone in the little village of Popularville seemed astir. Children, with their books and lunch baskets, were seen from every direction, wending their way to the old school house on the hill. Light-hearted men were hurrying to their daily work. While the women were busily engaged in washing dishes, making beds, sweeping and dusting, putting the house to order, and preparing the noonday meal for their families.

Popularville boasted of about five hundred inhabitants. A bank, probably about a half dozen stores and a postoffice, where the boys and men usually went each day at mail time, and would usually linger long discussing the events of the day. The little village was made up mostly of farmers who had made a wild rush for the place at first sight of the railroad, perhaps a dozen and one-half years before the time of this story—

in hopes of gaining timely wealth and popularity.

Just outside the outskirts of the little village could be heard the sound of hammers, as the workmen were driving the last nails in the repairing of the old Maxwell mansion. The old home was a beautiful sight this bright October morning, with the tall magnolias and cottonwoods scattering their brown leaves on the ground underneath them, on one side of the long gravel walk leading from the stately old mansion down to the old gate, that had swung on its hinges more than a century. While on the other side, little paths lead down through the cape jasamines; and roses, which with the fair lilies were bending their heads in meek submission to the coming winter. Even the honeysuckle, that had made such a fair race at covering the old pailing fence, had drooped in an attitude of contentment. And too, there was the old fashioned well, covered with trailing vines, and almost forgotten in the later and more modern ways of water supplies. Now, just a few more delicate touches of the brush on the inside, and the remodeling of the old home is completed.

Within the walls of this old farm home all was astir. Servants were hurrying from room to room putting each room in order. Here and there were old, worn pieces of furniture, to be replaced by new. Mrs. Maxwell, a sweet faced wife and mother, and mistress of the home, was going about quietly giving orders. While Uncle Tim Maxwell was out in the yard giving directions for the usual day's work on the farm, and wondering why "wimmin folks" had to have everything turned topsy-turvy from once to twice a year and made over.

Uncle Tim was little more than a middle-aged man, with black hair touched here and there with silver locks. probably caused by hard work and careful management from early boyhood. His deep blue eyes that bespoke perseverance and determination; his clean-shaven face, and not too tall but strongly built form. proved him to have been a very handsome man in his younger days. His broad shoulders had begun to slightly droop, but even now as in his youthful days, were thrown back in a moment of excitement, as if to prepare himself to bravely meet the foe.

Timothy Maxwell had been reared in a home as an only child, without brother or sister. His father and mother were good old-fashioned people content with the real necessities of life, that their day and time called for. And he could never understand why it took so much to "go on" these days. Pride and fashion were ruining the world today. He didn't know anything about "gals, nohow." And yet he would willingly give the last cent that he possessed for the comforts and pleasures of his family. And right here I want the reader to understand, that it was from hard work and long sleepless nights spent in deep thought that Timothy Maxwell had obtained his large farm, a comfortable home and moderate means. He had never been too good to work at anything that would bring himself and his family an honest dollar. Uncle Tim was a friend to everyone, although he had some peculiar ways, he was loved by all.

On this beautiful October morning Merle Maxwell sat in her room meditating for a few brief moments, then arose and dressed with unusual care for a day's shopping in the village. She was not what the world terms a beautiful girl, and yet, something in the large, dark, brown eyes, and the sweet expression on her face, would force one to think of her as the loveliest, most wonderful girl in the world. She looked in perfect harmony with the beatiful morning. Her very dark brown mass of waving hair was done low on her smooth white neck, with here and there a stray curl that refused to be pinned back. Her dark, heavy eyebrows, slightly arched, and the long, drooping eyelashes, made her already beautiful eyes appear more wonderful.

She looked unusually girlish in her tailored suit of blue.

The only ornaments she wore on this day were a la valliere set with pure rubies, and a ring set with a very odd stone, which she wore on her right hand.

Merle Maxwell was very careful in her manner of dress. Her toilet being complete, she took a last peep in the mirror, as most girls do, pulled her wide brimmed felt hat a little lower over her eyes; walked out into the spacious hall and out at the door. On the doorsteps, she turned back and called cheerily to some of the servants. Merle was loved by the servants, as by everyone else who chanced to know her. The sweet expression on her face, and her kind disposition, made it impossible for one to know and not love her.

She bounded down the long gravel walk, stopping here and there to pluck a cape jasamine, or bending her slender, girlish form to view some tiny flower, which was almost covered by the fallen leaves of Autumn. On she went, until she was startled by the click of the old swinging gate. As she raised her bright, smiling face, and quickly turned in the direction from which the sound came, she came face to face with two gentlemen. She smiled, bowed and passed out of the gate, and down the village road.

Let us go back for a few brief minutes to the two gentlemen. Mr. Latney, an artist in his profession, had been engaged to give the last delicate touches to the woodwork of the interior of the old mansion.

He was just a little stout for his medium height; but the kind expression on his face, and his gentle ways, bespoke a true gentleman. The baldness on the top of his head, in this case at least, was not a sign of approaching mature years, for he was yet a young man.

As for the other gentlemen, we must go back a few days prior to this eventful morning, when we see a tall. boyish, young man, with black hair and large blue eyes. It has been said that eyes are windows of the soul, and it must be true, in this case at least, for in our hero's eyes could be read honesty, truthfulness, intelligence, and in fact everything that it takes to make a true, noble character, for his was a pure, manly life. One distinguished feature of his character was that in talking to people he always looked them straight in the face, displaying a frank, open countenance.

Derris Leroy, for several months, had been collecting for a certain company in Shreveport, Louisiana, but something, intuition perhaps, had impressed upon his mind, of late, to give up his work for a few days. He knew not why—he had a good position. For days he tried to overcome the feeling, but some unknown power was impelling him to go to Mayfield, to his mother and sister.

After debating the question with himself and spending several sleepless nights, he boarded the train for that place. Upon arriving, he found his mother and sister in their usual health, which made matters more mystirious than ever. He had thought that one of them might be ill, or that something might have befallen them, thus causing the disturbance of his thoughts and mind.

A few days later, he was sitting in his room, when the postman came with a letter directed to him. Upon opening the sealed envelope he read as follows:

"My dear Derris: I am now at Popularville, a little country village, giving the finishing touches to the woodwork of the interior of a fine old mansion in the outskirts of the village. Truly, the little place has the right name. I am afraid if I remain here long I shall fall in love with the little country town. It is such a change from the city life that we are used to. Everything in the vicinity seems so romantic.

"Since I have been here, I am continually finding myself in deep reverie of our childhood days. Won't you come and spend a few days with me? I know you would enjoy a few days of quiet, besides our different careers in life have long separated us from each other, and nothing could give me more pleasure than to enjoy your presence for a few days at least, and again live our boyhood days in this quiet place. Don't disappoint me, and believe me to be your affectionate friend.

E. L. LATNEY."

He sat for a moment in deep thought. Then he drew himself up to the writing desk and wrote an acceptance, hardly realizing why he accepted an invitation of pleasure just at this time, when his work needed him. He was not a boy to take many pleasures. Work had always been first, then pleasure.

However, according to his promise, on the following Tuesday he bid adieu to his mother and sister, and almost wondering at his own maneuvers, departed for Popularvile, arriving late the same evening. He was met by his friend and escorted to the only hotel that the little village afforded. The following morning the two men arose, dressed and went down to breakfast. In spite of the meager accommodations an appetizing breakfast awaited them.

Breakfast being finished, the two returned to their room where they discussed their plans for the day. As they entered the room and closed the door, Mr. Latney turned to his young friend:

"Derris, will you accompany me to my work this morning, or do you prefer remaining here until I return this afternoon?"

Mr. Leroy expressed a desire to accompany his friend.

"I, myself, think you should enjoy the day looking over the wonderful old mansion and its beautiful grounds and surroundings," responded Mr. Latney.

So, accordingly, they set out for their morning walk, which was not more than a mile. They passed down the little village road so engrossed in conversation, with an occasional pause to admire a tall magnolia, or some fading flower, that they were scarcely aware of the fact that they had reached their destination until they had turned in at the old-fashioned gate and stood face to face with Merle Maxwell. Both wished her a pleasant good morning, and went on briskly up the long gravel walk.

They entered the house where Mr. Latney at once set about his work, leaving Derris to amuse himself by looking over the fine old mansion, or strolling out among the beautiful trees and flowers. All day, try as he might, Derris could not help thinking of the girl he had met that morning down the walk. The sweet, cheerful expression on her face; the bright look in her large, round eyes, and the slender, girlish form, was indelibly impressed upon his mind forever.

While he was thus musing, Merle had reached the village, stopping here and there on her way to speak a kind, cheerful word to some school girl or boy. For she, herself, was just free from school cares, having graduated with the highest honors from ———, Va., the previous year.

She went from place to place carefully, but cheerfully, selecting the desired articles. To some people shopping is an irksome task, while Merle made it a pleasure. She always found pleasure and happiness in most everything. Seldom anything came her way that she could not find a bright side somewhere. Her friends were numbered by her acquaintances. There was scarcely a child in the entire community that did not know and love her. Even in school she was loved and admired by her school mates. In fact, I think it would have been impossible to have found one half dozen enemies in her host of acquaintances and these were enemies through jealousy and envey of her talents and culture. But we shall speak of these characters in another chapter.

Her shopping finished, she returned home to find the workmen gone; all was peacefully quiet. She bounded up the steps, down the long spacious hall, and out on the back porch where she came into collision with old Aunt Texanna.

"Lor,' honey, yo' old auntie didn't see yo' comin."

"That is all right, Texanna, I am as much to blame as you."

And to quiet the old darkey's fears Merle placed a big, red apple in her hand and went on her way. The whites of the old negro's eyes were clearly visible as she looked down at the apple in her hand.

"Dat chile am an angel."

Texanna had been a servant in the Maxwell family for years, even before Merle was born. She was yet a mere child to the old negro, and was loved by her as dearly as the good old soul was capable of loving. The old darkey could hardly believe that Merle had passed her childhood days and was now a young lady of twenty summers.

The next morning the sun was streaming through the long, narrow window into Mr. Latney and Leroy's room. But above, here and there, dark clouds could be seen floating about and the air seemed a trifle warm for an October morning.

Mr. Latney turned to his young friend:

"Leroy, the weather looks threatening, and if it were not that I might lose your friendship, I would ask you to help me these next few days."

Leroy, just finishing his toilet, turned to address his friend.

"I was half wishing that you would ask me to assist you. We have not had the pleasure of working together since we were mere boys."

Mr. Latney drew down a pair of trousers that were hanging on the wall.

"Well, it is fortunate that I brought along these extra overalls."

Leroy had not thought of the nice broadcloth suit he was wearing.

"Since you are so kind as to furnish the working trousers, have you an extra hat?"

Mr. Latney picked up an old white hat, that had evidently seen better days, and stuffed it into the suit case with his own clothes.

As they walked out into the street, each seemingly lost in thought, Leroy was wondering why he was here spending valuable time. And why he had consented to accept this work when he had just left a much more profitable position—these he could not explain. But the thoughts that crowded all others out were: the opportunity of going again to the place where he had met the girl who was so forcibly impressed upon his mind; and, also, a faint hope that he might catch a glimpse of her bright, smiling face.

The floating clouds had gathered and by noon the rain was pouring, yet, that did not interfere with the young men's work, for it was on the interior of the house.

Merle bounded into the house; her mass of dark hair hanging loose over her shoulders, and as wet as water could possibly make it. Aunt Texanna looked up from the pan of dishes that she was washing.

"Chile, what yo' been up to now?"

"Just taking a good, old-fashioned head-wash, Auntie. Isn't this a glorious rain," exclaimed Merle, always turning everything into pleasure.

Just at this moment Mrs. Maxwell entered the room.

"Why, Merle, what have you been doing? Washing your hair on a cool day like this!" for the rain had made it a bit chilly.

"On, mother, I just couldn't resist the

temptation of giving my head one more good shower bath. This, no doubt, will be the last until next summer."

"Merle," remarked her mother, "you had best go to your room and change your wet dress to save a cold."

"All right, mother."

And as she went up to her room, she unexpectedly met Leroy in the hall. She dropped her head but looked up shyly as she passed him. Leroy thought he had never seen a more beautiful sight than this girlish form, with such a wealth of hair. The damp, rainy weather had caused little ringlets and curls to fall over her white forehead—a beautiful picture indeed.

As she entered her dressing room the roses on her cheeks deepened into crimson red. For several minutes she stood in silent thought. Could she ever forget the kind, thoughtful look in those earnest, blue eyes.

Why did this tall, manly form and noble countenance impress her thus differently from all other boys? Underneath the old white sombrero, Merle Maxwell could detect a true worthy gentleman.

CHAPTER II.

Deceit is the serpent's way
And holds the innocent ones at bay.
He crawls beneath the foilage deep
And bites the innocent as he creeps,
With beastly power and unjust way
He glories to make the meek his prey.

MERLE had always been care free, taking life just as it came. Now, dear reader, do not think for a moment that she was a frivolous and careless girl—she was far from that. In her school days on the little hill, she had studied hard to make good her grades. Then it was with deep, earnest effort that she graduated with highest honors from college, both in literary work and music. She had loved her school mates, both girls and boys, with tender schoolmate love. As yet, she had never burdened her heart with a real lover, though she had had several admirers. She was kind and friendly toward all. She had never consciously harmed any one by word or deed. In early childhood she had given her heart to God and united with the church of the little village. She tried to live true to the vows she had made to God and His church. To watch her daily life was enough to inspire one to a nobler, truer life. She was ever ready to stop and give a cheerful, encouraging word to one in despondency and gloom.

Bright and happy she looked on this cool Sabbath morning as she entered the door of the little church. She preferred walking to driving on a morning like this and the brisk walk, together with the wind blowing from the north, had brought the rose to her cheeks. Some half dozen little Sunday school boys and girls met her at the door, clinging to her as she went up the aisle, for she was teacher of the little juniors. One little lad threw his arm around her and looked up into her sweet face.

"Miss Merle, I think you're pretty."

In trying to speak a loving word to each little heart she failed to answer the child.

"Miss Merle, you know why I think you're pretty?"

"No, Renel, I don't see why anyone should think me good-looking."

Little Renel looked up in surprise at this.

"Why, it's because I love you."

With tenderness she pressed the lad to her heart. Oh, that she could have always had the confidence in humanity that she now had! Her life had been gentle and pure. She never entertained a thought that all in the world were not honest and truthful. In fact, she trusted others implicitly, as she hoped they trusted her.

As the people of the little village thronged into church that Sabbath morning, for they would attend church, whether to show their finery in dress, or for the lack of some other place to go on the Sabbath morning; or the true Christian spirit of attending church to worship, we cannot say, but go to church they did. There were, no doubt, some under each class. "Miss Merle," as she was lovingly called by many, knew that the noble character, so forcibly impressed upon her mind, was not there. But it had not occurred to her that while all Popularville were at church he was sitting in his quiet room thinking of her.

On the following day Merle had gone out and mailed a wedding gift to a dear schoolmate whose wedding day was fast approaching. As she turned from the postman and went up the steps of the dear old house she met Leroy coming out. Raising his hat, for every true gentleman is ever ready to take off his hat to pure womanhood, he bowed.

"Miss Maxwell, ere long the work on your grand old house will be finished and Mr. Latney and I will cease to trouble you with our coming and going."

"Your presence has not been in the least offensive, Mr. Leroy. It has been a pleasure to have both you and Mr. Latney in our home, and should you remain in our village longer we would be glad indeed to have you attend our Sunday school and meet many of the young people."

"I assure you that nothing could give me more pleasure, Miss Maxwell. And should I decide to remain here longer, I shall afford myself that pleasure."

As he went on his way to his room, he thought he would go anywhere at any time to look again at that face. He knew that he should go back to his former work but, at the same time, something was compelling him to remain. Could he afford to sacrifice a good position and work with his friend Latney for the pleasure of being near and occasionally seeing this girl, who had so unexpectedly come into his life? Yes, it was worth the price. It meant everything to him. He would remain yet a few days. Then, perhaps, he could get the consent of his heart and mind to return to his old life. His thoughts had always been absorbed in his work; striving to make a success in business life. True he had girl acquaintances and friends, but never before had he realized that there was one girl in the world he could not be happy without.

Merle, with the roses in her cheeks which had deepened almost to a flush, ran into the kitchen where Aunt Texanna was preparing dinner.

"Auntie, you do look tired and fatigued this evening. Let me make the fruit pudding for dinner."

The old negro turned as she mopped the

perspiration from her kind old face, for in spite of the very cool fall day, the intense heat of the large range stove made the room most too warm to be comfortable.

"Bless yo; honey, you go right out o' here this minit'. Think yo' old auntie going to have her darlin's fair face blistered by the heat of a cook stove? Where on earth did my little baby learn anything about making puddin's?"

"Why Auntie, don't you remember how you used to let me help you cook before I went away to school? Then is when I learned and I am going to help you now for you have had a hard day."

"Bless yo' angel heart, chile. Some one does care for ole black mammy."

The old negro would have, willingly, given her life for the girl she loved, only as a true-hearted old servant can love. Merle was, oh, so happy. She knew not why. And in her happiness she wanted to make others happy, and thus seized the opportunity of assisting the old servant in the preparing of a dinner. Always, when we are superlatively happy, we want others to be happy, too. The girl did not realize the great change that had come into her heart and life. She had always been cheerful and happy, but never before had the world seemed so dear to her.

A few mornings later, Merle and her mother were out at the work house giving careful directions to the servants as to the washing of some dainty, hand-made article s when a servant came out and handed her a card.

"Miss, Merle, a gentleman wishes to see you."

"All right, Madie, say that I will be in in a few minutes."

Merle looked down at her plain, linen house frock and,as she shook back the curls that had fallen in clusters about her fair forehead, she walked into the room.

Leroy arose.

"Miss Maxwell, I could not resist the temptation of strolling out to your home again this beautiful morning. We are not often blessed with such wonderful days during the winter months."

Merle motioned him to a chair, at the same time taking one herself.

"I, too, was out basking in the warm sunshine."

"I trust I did not discommode you by my unexpected call, Miss Maxwell."

"No, not in the least, Mr. Leroy, I was just on the eve of returning to the house to try some new music. Shall I sing?"

And without waiting for a reply, she seated herself at the piano and ran her slender fingers deftly over the keys as song after song she sung. To Leroy it seemed that she sang from the depths of her pure heart. And not until he felt that it would be an imposition did he cease to urge her to continue singing. When she sang, she sang from her heart to God, and when she played, she played to God. No wonder her hearers were always so deeply impressed by her music.

Time passed so quickly that when Leroy made his departure it was almost time for lunch. To Merle the few remaining days of that week passed slowly. She was so unmistakably happy that she was on the alert, wanting to do something to help some one. Merle Maxwell had never been one to idle life away, and now, she longed to be busy at something.

Another Sabbath morning dawned and with it came a cold wind from the north. Did Merle remain indoors? No, she ordered the pony carriage and at nine forty-five went again to Sunday school. The inclemency of the weather seldom ever kept her away from her little Sunday school class. She realized that these tiny boys and girls were watching her life. And with all of her faults she was striving to lead them to higher, nobler lives. Yes, she had gone out and brought children who had never before attended Sunday school; whose parents had neglected to teach them the true conception of the Sabbath day No child or grown person was so poor or uncouth that she would not offer a kind word or deed. She would do anything, within the bounds of reason, to help one to higher ideals of life.

She was doing her best to rightly instruct the mere handfull of boys and girls who had ventured out on a day like this, when the little church door softly opened causing her to look in that direction just as Derris Leroy entered and took his seat in the young men's class. Yes, Leroy had gone out to Sunday school, because the dearest girl in all the world—to him—had asked him to go. In childhood days he had been brought up in Sunday school and church. But after leaving home and mother he had grown careless and neglectful of church duties. His was a noble Christian character grown cold and indifferent to church duties through neglect alone. Inspired by the sincere fidelity of this mere girl, he would again attempt the life taught by his dear mother.

After the dismissal of Sunday school, he waited on the church steps for the one girl in all the world to him. And it was with determination in his heart to prove worthy of such a character that he handed Merle into her waiting carriage.

The days passed on and yet Leroy remained with Mr. Latney, until one day he received a letter from his sister urging him to return home at once. At the same time reproving him for the work he was engaged in He knew that he must go and that he had already put in too much time away from his work. But how could he go away without once more seeing the girl whom he knew he loved more than life itself? He might return again soon, then again, circumstances might not permit him to ever return. Oh, if he could only see her and pour out his heart's love to her! Then he could go contented; but he dare not yet. He would risk to fate yet awhile. His sister's letter was an urgent request to come at once and go he must.

The time was drawing near when the village stage coach should arrive and he knew that he would go. What was that? And as he turned at the sound of horse's hoofs he beheld a carriage, that he knew all too well, driving out of the village. Why hadn't he seen her earlier and told her the necessity of his sudden departure? No, he would come again soon or write and explain.

The days went happily on with Merle The village club met in regular session one afternoon and she was there in her usual spirit of cheerfulness, jesting with everyone until she overheard her name spoken and naturally listening heard a conversation between two of the ladies, who were standing a little apart from the main circle.

Here, dear reader, we must introduce a very disagreeable character, Mrs. Felecia Langford. Truly, on Sunday she was a devout Christian, but her very sanctimonious and pious countenance betrayed a heart full of deceit. Her small, beadlike eyes bespoke haughtiness and false pride. It would have been almost impossible for one to have been as good as she, apparently, on Sunday. While during the week her greatest avocation was slandering and talking about other people. Continually keeping up disturbances and hard feelings between neighbors, or any who would listen to her backbitings. Oh, the heartaches caused by a word spoken unkindly!

While the other members of the club were spending a few minutes socially, Mrs. Langford had drawn one aside to interrogate concerning certain people. As she looked up over her nose glasses to see that none were listening:

"Who is that new comer that is paying so much attention to Merle Maxwell?"

"Really, I don't know," returned the other lady, "but I believe his name is Leroy. He seems to be a gentleman."

The very idea of one speaking so kindly of another, especially a stranger, caused Mrs. Langford to elevate her eyebrows.

"Well, he sure is a setten' her. Do you know where he is from?" And lowering her voice, "you know he was at church with her yesterday, and I believe he put a whole dollar in the collection basket. Being a new comer, I guess he wanted to show off a little."

Just then, the president calling the house to order, prevented her from saying more.

The remainder of the afternoon, Merle's thoughts were on the conversation she had just overheard. She had not intended to listen, but upon hearing her name called, she, like any of us, was anxious to know the rest. She did not understand why anyone should speak slightly of Mr. Leroy. She had never been used to gossipers and did not know what it meant. In spite of what she had heard, Merle tried to be her usual cheerful self. And when she suggested an entertainment for raising some necessary funds, Felecia Langford nudged the lady by her side:

"She thinks Mr. Leroy will be here, no doubt."

Fortunately for Merle that she did not hear this remark.

For days she worried over these remarks. Had this been the extent of her grievances she would have had no cause for worrying. It might have been better, as she thought in later years, had she not been permitted to live to face the cruel realities that were sure to come. Oh, the pain and sorrow that can be inflicted by one deceitful life! Dear reader, don't live a deceitful life; don't appear to be a friend when you are not. Above all be frank and honest. "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

As the days went on, Merle, though she could not help occassionally thinking of the unkind remarks she had heard concerning Mr. Leroy and herself, tried to persuade herself that she, perhaps, had misunderstood. Anyway she would not judge Mrs. Langford for she had always seemed to be a friend. Even if she was positive that her ears had not deceived her, she was sure that the woman had meant no harm, and thus dismissed it from her mind as nearly as possible.

A few days later Leroy arrived in Poplarville. As he walked up the rickety sidewalk on his way to the meagre hotel, he met some two or three ladies. One dropped a little behind the others and came to a halt.

"Good morning, Mr. Leroy, how is your girl?"

Leroy, startled by her thus addressing him:

"Why I fail to understand. Whom do you mean?"

And with a meaning glance over her spectacles:

"I mean Merle Maxwell."

Leroy, now amused almost to the verge of laughing outright:

"Oh, she is all right thank you."

"No doubt you think so. You had better be careful. She is awful sweet but she will deceive you in her own good time. Better take my advice."

As she finished this in almost one breath, Felecia Langford hurried on to join the other ladies, leaving Derris almost paralyzed with surprise.

What could she have meant? He had seen this same tall, stiff figure sitting in church with her hands folded and her head apparently immovable, looking as though she had never committed a wrong in her life. Well, he did not believe one word she had said—whoever she might be. As for her being sweet, he knew that Merle Maxwell was the sweetest girl on earth, and he also knew that she was not deceitful. As for being careful and taking this person's unsought advice, he would seek advice from altogether a different character, should it be necessary to ask advice concerning as pure and gentle womanhood as Merle Maxwell.

That very evening after Leroy had done justice to a dish of chicken salad with slices of white bread and marshmallow sandwiches a la mode with a cup of tea, he walked out in the bright moonlight to the home of Merle Maxwell. Though it was a winter month the night was not unpleasant.

On this eventful evening Merle wore a gown of red velvet, with a necklace of pure rubies as her only ornament. A beautiful picture she was as she walked down the long gravel path in the bright moon beams.

She was leaning against the old picket fence, meditating, when Leroy came up. She was not startled at hearing him speak her name gently, for it was he that her thoughts were centered on. She only wondered if she were not dreaming. He pushed the gate open, then came and stood by her. ..

"You, too, are out for a stroll in the beautiful moonlight."

As she drew her mantle closer about her:

"Yes, I could not remain indoors on an evening like this."

Leroy thought that she never looked more beautiful than now. He must know his fate. How he longed to take her in his arms and pour out his heart of pure love, but he dared not. And looking straight into her bright eyes he said:

"Merle, I love you. Will you not try to return that love and one day be my wife?"

She hesited a few minutes and then looking up into his face with a bright smile said:

"I will."

And there with no one save God as a witness, two hearts were bound together forever by sacred promise. They were too happy to talk.

The night air was growing chilly; Leroy placed her mantle over her shoulders and led her to the house, and after paying respects to Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell he made his departure, a perfectly happy man. Oh! that nothing had ever come to mar their perfect happiness!

CHAPTER III.

DERRIS Leroy was, truly, the happiest boy that ever lived—he thought. He had the promise of heart and hand of one that was as pure and gentle as the fairest flower that ever blossomed on old mother earth. He was contented now to go back to his work. And, if need be, he would work more earnestly than ever before, so that when Merle Maxwell became his wife he could give her every comfort and grant every wish that heart could desire. His greatest pleasure was to live for her alone. He would have willingly given his life rather than to have seen one shadow cross her bright happy life. She should never know the unkind remark uttered against her by that despicable person on the street.

He went back once more and bade her goodbye, promising to return as often as his work would permit, if just for a day.

Merle was as happy as a lark. This new love coming into her heart and life inspired her to a nobler, more consecrated life than ever before. Her ideals of a home were the highest conceivable. Above all, she wanted a Christian home with God ruling supremely. True is the love that lifts one to a better and nobler life.

Merle Maxwell had never kept a secret from her dear, good mother, but she would not tell anyone of her wonderful happiness just yet. It was so sweet to know that no one knew but her and Derris. She knew that both her father and mother liked and admired him and that was enough.

If she thought that no one knew of her love for Derris Leroy but him and herself, she was mistaken. For one day, not long after his departure, she was in the kitchen trying to assist Texanna in some baking when that worthy old soul patted her on her shoulder.

"Honey, I'se so glad yo' loves Marser Leroy. He 'peers to be such a fine young gen'lman."

"Thank you, Aunt Texanna, but who told you this?"

"Nobody, chile. Aint I got eyes? Can't I see how happy you is?"

"But Auntie, haven't I always been happy?"

"'Course, honey, but there's a new expression o' happiness on yo' angel face."

"I am so glad, Auntie."

And the old darky nodded her kinky head in approval as if to say, "I won't tell nobody, honey."

The days went on pleasantly. The ground was covered with the winter's snow. Soon the Christmas holidays would be on hand and

Merle was happily engaged in making gifts. Each little Sunday school scholar must be remembered. Then, she knew some poor little children, whose hearts had never been made happy on Christmas eve by some little gift. Besides, there were a host of relatives and friends that she would like to remember! Yes, she must think of something for each servant, especially for Aunt Texanna. She was working light hearted early and late.

One day the mail brought a letter containing information that a near relative of her mother was seriously ill which necessitated Mrs. Maxwell's leaving at once. Thus leaving the overseeing of all the household cares to Merle.

She got along wonderfully with the servants. And with the aid of her father all was going well, until one day when he became suddenly ill. "When it rains it pours" is a true old adage. At first she was startled at the situation. Then she laid aside all thoughts of her gift making and took the entire responsibilities of the domestic affairs upon her young shoulders. She had watched her mother and heard her give directions to the servants. And as nearly as possible she followed in her steps. Truly, the prospect of this fast approaching Christmas was a gloomy outlook to Merle, but not one time did she murmur. Of course she would have liked for existing circumstances to have been different, but she was not one to complain.

The snow had ceased falling; the day before Christmas eve dawned clear and bright; and with it, to the surprise of all, came Mrs. Maxwell. The ill relative was safely on the road to recovery. Surely things were changing for the better as quickly as they had changed for worse a few weeks previous. Mr. Maxwell was able to stir about in his room.

The same afternoon Merle went out and

purchased gifts instead of those lying in her work basket unfinished. Just one other wish granted and her happiness would be complete. Leroy had written that it would be impossible for him to spend Christmas with her, since he could not leave his work just at that time. Hence he would be forced to spend a lonely Christmas away from her. In spite of this, all Christmas eve she watched for him, hoping some good fortune would yet befall him. And she knew that he would come if opportunity presented itself. Well, she had many, many things for which to be happy, even if Leroy could't come. But a surprise awaited her.

On Christmas day she was sitting before the fire enjoying some chocolates, when Madie came in and announced a gentleman to see "Miss Merle."

As she stepped out into the reception hall there stood Derris Leroy. Surely this was the happiest Christmas that she had ever spent.

Leroy had only a day or two for vacation. He could only spend a few hours with Merle, but happy were those few hours for both. All day they talked and planned for their future, and in the afternoon Mr. Maxwell insisted that he remain and participate in the old-fashioned turkey dinner that Aunt Texanna had prepared.

These few pleasant hours passed all too quickly. And again Leroy bade good-bye to the dear old place and its inmates, to take up his work with renewed energy. Since a mere boy he had worked diligently, climbing higher and higher. He had invested largely in property and other profitable resources. Now he was glad for every denied pleasure. Many were the times when others were enjoying life that his thoughts were lost in careful planning. Oh, that she had gone with him this happy Christmas. But she was young and he was yet in his twenties. And she wished to stay in her good home yet a while. He did not insist. Her pleasure and happiness was his greatest desire now. He would build and prepare a home for her in Mayfield—the best that money could obtain. Yes, he would plant beautiful trees and make a flower garden to beautify their home, because she loved these. Then, when she wished, he would take her to be queen of that home. These two were not ashamed of their love for each other, yet they were not ready for the world to know of their engagement.

After the excitement of the Christmas holidays came quietude; and the little village settled down once more into its life of contentment. Nevertheless, the gossipers were faithful to their calling. Felecia Langford had enough news to impart to keep her busy for days. She informed each of her neighbors, in a very confidential manner, that Derris Leroy had spent Christmas with the Maxwells. She guessed the Maxwells would be glad to make a match with Merle and "that" Mr. Leroy, provided they could.

Mrs. Langford had not found much consolation in expressing her opinions of Merle Maxwell, until one day when she was confiding her thoughts to Miss Amanda Ogilvie, who agreed with her completely. Amanda Ogilvie had long since passed her thirtieth birthday and had not, as yet, succeeded in captivating a life companion. As Felecia Langford grew more and more enthused over her narrative, probably due to an attentive listener, concerning Merle and Leroy, Miss Amanda turned up her small, sharp nose in utter disgust.

"I wouldn't go with that ugly human for anything in the world."

And while she spoke she knew that she wished it had been she instead of Merle Maxwell, who had the admiration of this worthy young man. Though she was his senior by a few years, at least, she remembered the hope that had leaped into her heart when she had seen him at first and how she wished that he might come her way. The scar now on her forehead reminded her of the attempt at curling her hair with an old discarded table fork, after searching several minutes in vain for the long-forgotten curling irons, on a Sabbath morn when he had first come to the little village. Of late, she had felt a keen consciousness of her age and appearance. These facts she imparted to no one.

Mrs. Langford arose to go. At the door she turned back.

"Amanda, did you know that another was to see Merle Maxwell the other day?"

Miss Ogilvie took a step nearer the door.

"Felecia Langford, how did you hear this?"

"I didn't hear; I saw with my own eyes, as I passed there a few days ago, a young man leaving the house and Merle standing in the door. I don't know for the life of me who he was. He looked like a perfect dude. I would just like to know what Derris Leroy would think of that. But Merle will be sure that he never knows," she muttered as she went out at the gate.

In this Mrs. Langford was wrong, as we shall see, for Amanda Ogilvie's thoughts were already at work.

A few days previous to Mrs. Langford's neighborly call on Amanda, Merle Maxwell was improving her time at the piano when she was pleasantly surprised by the appearance of an old school-mate who happened to be passing throug the village. They had not sean each other since their senior year in the village school.

Pleasantly the afternoon was spent in talking over their happy school days, and when the time came, which passed all too quickly, for him to go, Merle had followed him to the door just in time to see Felecia Langford pass in her hansom. Glad, indeed, was she to see this childhood comrade, as she would have been glad to see any of her old school mates. She knew that she would tell Derris of her unexpected pleasure and he, too, would be glad.

A new year had dawned, and the time to elect or re-elect officials in the little village church had arrived. That Merle was re-elected teacher of her class is not surprising, for not one little member would willingly give her up. One by one the classes had been provided with teachers.

Then the nominations for an organist were made and the nominee voted on. The one elected by a great majority of votes was no other than Merle Maxwell. Well, she felt it an honor to have these offices in the church conferred upon her, but here was one too gentle and well-born to feel vain. She felt keenly her unworthiness, and realized a great responsibility before her. But she had never shirked a church duty and would not in this.

She half wished that it had been some other than herself, and altogether wished it when she heard Felecia Langford remark to a group of ladies that she didn't see why they didn't put some one else in. Right here we must say that Felecia Langford, in her younger days, had studied music for a few months and had taught, or tried to teach, a little class of beginners. And she felt that no one in or near the little village knew quite so much about music as she. Apparently, she failed to realize that those whom she had once tried to teach could now easily teach her. But this vainglorious character would have been the last to acknowledge a fault or wrong. For some, to look upon her sanctimonious countenance, it would appear that she had never even made a mistake in her life. But, to the careful observer, a heart and life black with deceit was clearly visible. Oh, what a help it would have been had she spoken a kind word of praise instead of those cruel, hurtful words. But the truth, dear reader, is this: she wanted the honor of being organist herself. If Merle had but known the sorrow and heart-aches destined her by this woman, she would have willingly given her the place that she so coveted.

Merle left the little church this Sabbath morning with the heaviest heart that she had ever borne. Oh, if people would only busy themselves with their own affairs and speak kindly of others or not speak at all, what a wonderful world this would be! The horror of pure Christian characters being crushed by a selfish motive!

On account of the absence of the organist, Felecia Langford, on a few occasions, had presided at the little church organ. A comical sight she was, indeed, as she sat at the instrument with her tall stiff form bent forward and gazing intently on the music before her through her nose spectacles, her entire being shaking with exertion as she counted to her playing. Sometimes aloud and again in low mumbling tones could be distinguished her "one and, two and, three and, four and." Had she only desired the information, some of her old pupils could have enlightened her with the information that it was wiser to play to one's counting instead of counting to one's playing.

While things were thus taking place in Popularville we will go back for a short time to our hero, who was sitting in his room composing a letter to Merle Maxwell, when a knock sounded on his door. He arose from his writing desk and opened the door to admit a couple of boy friends who had come to spend the evening with him. He, himself, did not smoke, but he rang for a servant and ordered cigars for the other two gentlemen before entering into conversation. For a time they discussed current events. One discussion leading to another, until one of the young men noticed the unfinished letter, and, being somewhat mischievous, began at once to jest Leroy concerning to whom it was written. Derris Leroy did a thing very unlike his quiet, sincere nature. He went to the desk in pretense of finishing the message. But instead, pushed the unfinished letter aside and wrote a very short, friendly letter to Amanda Ogilvie. Then laid it on the desk in plain view of the other parties. Now, our hero was not given to frivolities of any nature and seldom joked anyone. But he knew that his friend, at one time, had been on extremely friendly terms with Miss Ogilvie, and took this means of playing even with him. The merriment went on for a few minutes, then they went back to their former conversation.

At length the young men arose to make their departure. Leroy followed them out on the balcony wishing them a pleasant good evening, when one of the young men returned, hurriedly, into the house to procure a forgotten umbrella; for outside a cold mist of rain was falling. He stepped into the room and picked up his umbrella, Then, turning to Leroy's desk he seized the unintended letter written to Amanda Ogilvie and also an envelope which Leroy had addressed to Merle Maxwell early in the evening.

After the boys had gone, Leroy returned to his room intent upon finishing his letter to Merle. In his eagerness to write, and everything being banished from his mind save the thought of the dearest one in all the world to him, he failed to notice the absence of either the letter or the envelope.

The following morning he went out and mailed the letter, together with a box of choclates, to Merle Maxwell. Then he set about his usual day's work. His father had died ere Leroy had scarcely spent his twenty-first birthday. His mother had gone to make her future home with an only daughter. And he, in his young manhood, had started out to face the world alone. Not alone, for he knew and realized the presence of One ever true and right that had been taught him at his mother's knee in childhood. And with Him he was not afraid to face the realities of life. It was then that he met Mr. Latney who taught him the art of finishing wood work. Later, he secured a position as traveling salesman, climbing higher and higher, until now he was superintendent of a company at Mayfield, where he intended building a home for himself and and Merle. During the day his thoughts were centered on his duties. In the long evenings he was free to think of and plan for her.

Happiness was his, as he walked to his office on this morning. Not one time had he thought of the friendly message that he had written to Amanda Ogilvie the previous evening—it was only a joke. He had had no intention of mailing it. When he had made his first appearance in Popularville to spend a few days with Mr. Latney, he had met Miss Ogilvie, just as he had met others, and he thought of her only as an elderly friend, if he ever thought of her at all. He had merely shown a friendly disposition by turning the joke on his friend. Oh, that he had never done this! It was so unlike him to joke with any one. Never before was he known to jest concerning any one, and this was intended for his mischievous friend, only.

Had Felecia Langford and Amanda Ogilvie had the pleasure of witnessing this little incident from beginning to end, their hearts would have been made to rejoice. They could not have wished anything more pleasing to them, for they were happiest when they knew that their superiors were suffering.

CHAPTER IV.

THE day outside had been a gloomy one. Here and there could be seen streaks of the blue sky, seemingly forcing its appearance through the cold, gray clouds, that had been hovering near all day. Occasionally, the sun forced a ray of light on old mother earth, vanishing as suddenly as it had appeared, leaving all the more desolate.

Merle Maxwell, happy in heart though somewhat lonely and anxious, had gone to the window for the twentieth time and gazed intently out in search of the village postman. The last time her wish was granted, for just a short distance from her home she could detect an object coming into view over the little hill. Waiting and watching for just a moment she knew too well the uniform to belong to no other than the village postman that she had watched for so much of late.

It seemed that he would never reach her house. And in her eagerness she hurriedly went out at the door, halting as she started down the steps. What if there should be no mail today; no message from the one that she most wanted to hear from? She walked on more slowly down the long gravel walk, and met one of the servants coming up with the mail. Madie must have partly read the question in the expression of her young mistress's face, for she answered by giving her the mail, which consisted of an only letter. And fearing that her mistress was disappointed, said:

"Not much mail today, Miss Merle, such a bad day."

As she uttered this last remark she looked up te see her lady ascend the last step and enter the house.

At one fleeting glance Merle had recognized the hand writing now so familiar to her, and hastened to her room to be alone with the contents of the letter which she had waited so anxiously for. She always wanted to be alone to read the message from Leroy, and usually sought her own private room. Eagerly she broke the seal and read:

"DEAR MISS OGILVIE:

I was certainly glad to receive a letter from you. I am always glad to know you are well and happy, for I know you are deserving and worthy. You don't know how I would enjoy seeing all of you. I certainly enjoyed myself when there before. I would enjoy hearing you play your new music. I am sure it is grand to hear. It seems that everyone should be happy now for the South is enjoying prosperity now and I hope it may continue. Write me a long letter when you get this.

"Your friend,
"DERRIS LEROY."

As she read the last word the letter slipped from her hands to the floor. For a moment she stood with clasped hands, staring blankly, then sank to the floor. No, she did not faint, but it seemed that her strength had failed her. She had never had such feelings. Why could she not think? She had no energy to rise, and for moments sat with bowed head, and hands clasped to her heart.

Presently she arose, picked up the letter and tried to collect her thoughts. There was the letter written to Amanda Ogilvie, and the envelope addressed to herself all in Leroy's handwriting that she knew so well. It was unmistakable. He had evidently written to both her and Amanda Ogilvie at the same time. And through mistake he had sent her letter to Miss Ogilvie. At the same time sending Miss Ogilvie's letter to her. How could it be true? Yet, it was so plain. And he had said in his letter that he was glad to receive a letter from Miss Ogilvie. He had enjoyed himself when there. When had he been there? And when, or where had he met

Amanda Ogilvie, whom he so much admired? Yes, he thought she was so deserving and worthy. And he wanted to hear her play. Oh! what should she do? But she felt in her heart that there must be some mistake. Leroy had said that he cared for no one but herself and she knew he was true. Oh! if she could only think, think, think.

Again and again she read the short missive. She noticed that it had been written hurriedly. There was no doubt about it being Derris' own writing. But it was not like the even, smooth and carefully composed letters that she had been accustomed to receiving from him. It was not her letter and she had no right to continue reading it. She would send it to Amanda Ogilvie and offer her apologies for having read it at all, though it was through a mistake.

She remained in her room, not caring to disclose her distress to anyone. The afternoon was almost spent and the usual hour for dinner at the Maxwell home had arrived. Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell had seated themselves at the dining table, when they noticed the absence of their fair daughter—the life and sunshine of the home. Mrs. Maxwell summoned Madie and sent her to inquire after her lady. Madie soon returned with the intelligence that "Miss Merle" was the victim of a slight headache; and begged them to excuse her absence from dinner. The excuse being acceptable, the meal went on as usual save for the absence of Merle's jolly, desirable presence. Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell trusted their daughter implicitly. They knew that she would not absent herself from their presence without a reasonable excuse, and that she had sent.

However, Aunt Texanna was not contented with Madie's answer. After dinner had been served; the last dish put in its proper place; the silverware carefully polished and laid away, she stole softly up to "her baby's" room and knocked gently on the door. Merle bade her come in and was somewhat surprised when she beheld Aunt Texanna coming cautiously in.

Texanna was astonished when she saw the paleness and drooping head of the girl she had nursed from infancy. Going up to her she laid ner black, chubby hand, tenderly, on her head.

"Honey, what ails yo'?"

Merle, trying to appear in her usual alert way, replied:

"Not anything, Auntie, only a slight headache. I shall be allright soon. Besides, if I should need anything I will call you. So don't worry."

Thus kindly dismissed the old darky quitted the room, doubtfully shaking her kinky head.

Before retiring Mrs. Maxwell went up to

inqure after her daughter. And being assrued that there was nothing serious, bade her an affectionate good night. For Merle, it was a sleepless night. Tossing on her bed until the break of day had dawned. Then falling into a troubled slumber, only to awake to the dreadful realities of the unfortunate letter.

She arose, went to her desk and addressed an envelope to Derris Leroy. In this envelope she placed Amanda Ogilvie's letter that she had received the previous day, and mailed it early that day. She did not send it to Miss Ogilvie as she had thought of doing the day before. But instead,she sent it to Leroy with apologies for having read that which was not intended for her. It all seemed like a dream. She could scarcely believe it was true. Oh! how could she tell her mother that he was untrue? Of course it was only a friendly letter to Amanda Ogilvie. But from the tone of the letter their messages were evidently a frequent occurrance. They had solemenly promised each other on that memorable night, with God as an only witness, to love and live for each other alone. The letter was plainly Leroy's handwriting. Yet, something, intuition perhaps, told her that there was a mistake. She could not doubt his fidelity. She did not understand; and her thoughts were so confused.

The days passed wearily on for Merle. To the world she was apparently the same happy and contented girl. But inwardly her heart was breaking from disappointment in the one she loved and trusted. Her thoughts were continually dwelling on those happy and never-to-be forgotten days that she had spent with him—her lover. She strived hard each day to blot him out of her memory, but all in vain. For one of Merle Maxwell's gentle nature, to love, means a love of whole heart and life ever true and unchangable. Since the night of her betrothal, Merle Maxwell had not failed to ask God each day to bless and keep her lover and to guard them in their love. Now, she prayed more earnestly and more frequently. Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell knowing nothing of their child's distress suspected nothing, but to the most careful observer could be detected a sadness in the bright eyes and countenance. And from the night she had complained of a headache, Texanna carefully watched her "baby." And often the corner of her clean, checked apron was raised to her eyes.

The cold, winter days were written down in the book of memory. Spring in all its beauty was approaching, The magnolias and cottonwoods were putting on their coats of green. Here and there could be seen cape jassamines budding forth. The tiny, wild flowers were filling the air with sweet odor. Various birds could be heard chirping and singing their sweet melodies, in nearby woods. If autumn is beautiful, where do we find words to express the grandeur of springtime?

Merle Maxwell, in her disappointment and sadness of heart, had not once failed in her duties to her God and church. Just a few days until Easter Sunday, and she, with others, were striving hard to make the Easter program at the little church a success. The ladies and children had met at the church a few times for rehearsal when, one afternoon, Felecia Langford suggested that the children together with Merle, meet in her house the following afternoon, for the purpose of rehearsing some special songs with the children. And, accordingly. turned to Merle and insisted that she be present since she was to furnish the instrumental music. She consented to do so, and on the following afternoon was there at the appointed hour.

After rehearsing as long as they deemed

necessary and the children had departed for their homes, Felecia Langford drew her chair up near the fire, for there was a cool Easter gale and said:

"Merle, do you know why Amanda Ogilvie doesn't go to church more often?"

"'Why no, Mrs. Langford, I am sure I don't" replied Merle somewhat surprised. Felecia Langford lowered her tone:

"Well, I can just tell you. It is because you are organist and she wanted to have that place herself. She even said that she nor any of her reletives should not go the choir so long as you hold that position."

Merle, thoroughly astonished at this information:

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Langford," she said, "I wish it had been she elected instead of myself. It is not my intention to keep anyone away from the church, and I am very sorry if

I have in any way offended her or any of her relatives."

And as she arose to go, not caring to continue the conversation, Felecia Langford remarked:

"I wouldn't give over to Amanda Ogilvie if I were you. It wouldn't be right. The church wanted you or it would not have elected you."

"I am very sorry for it all, Mrs. Langford," is all Merle said as she tied on her straw sombrero and went on her way home with another grievance added to her already aching heart. That evening as she sat in her room pondering over the words of Felecia Langford, she asked herself:

"What is the reward for fidelity and loyalty to one's church?" For some, there is love and happiness; for others, criticism and despondency.

Easter Sunday arrived and she went to

Sabbath school as usual, and went through services as though Felecia Langford had not spoken Amanda Ogilvie's name to her. When church was over Merle immediately started for home, preferring to be alone with her thoughts. And as she went down the little church aisle some one touched her arm, and turning, a gentleman said:

"May I speak to you a moment, Miss Merle?"

"Yes," she answered, and followed him to the front of the building. When they had reached the secretary's desk the gentleman, an old friend of the Maxwell family said:

"Miss Merle, if I were you, I would not attend the Easter program this evening. I have heard through reliable persons that Felecia Langford and Amanda Ogilvie are planning a public insult for you on this occasion."

"I will consider this, Mr. Topleitz, but why should these two plan humiliation for me? I have never intentionally offended either in any way. Besides, both the ladies, Mrs. Langford especially, appear to be such true friends..'

Mr. Topleitz looked kindly down upon the child of his old comrade and friend:

"Ah, child, you have much to learn yet of this cold, unfriendly world! Deceit often lurks where least expected. We all know that no one has a just cause to inflict humiliation and mortification upon you, but often the pure and innocent are made to suffer by the cruel words and unkind deeds of others, whose hearts are black with sin."

"I thank you," she said, "and shall carefully consider the things you have said before making my decision." And looking about she saw that the church was vacated save for the janitor. She hurried out to her waiting carriage and ordered the driver to speed the ponies homeward.

All the afternoon she debated the question in her mind, should she go or remain at home? At length, she decided to go and fulfil her duty suffering the consequences whatever they might be. She was ready to go and had gone in to pay respects to her mother before going, when a servant rushed in saying one of the ponies had taken suddenly ill and he had telephoned for the veterinarian. Mrs. Maxwell would not risk her child to go behind any save the ponies, especially in the evenings. Fearing the driver might become careless, leaving her child's life at the peril of a spirited team.

As to whether this incident was providential you may judge for yourself, dear reader. If providence favored Merle Maxwell it also favored Felecia Langford, for that Easter night she exultingly seated herself at the little church organ and triumphantly begun, her "one and, two and, three and, four and."

Adam Langford, the little hen pecked husband of Felecia Langford, was (unfortunately for Popularville) an official in the church. Being a small, self-conceited personage, he was ever glad of an opportunity to exercise his authority. And on the following week, urged on by his wife, he called a meeting of the official board and at once made known his object by proposing and insisting upon the election of a new organist, at the same time suggesting Amanda Ogilvie. The other members of the session were surprised to the extent of being struck dumb. While they stood there speechless, trying to collect their thoughts, Adam Langford continued by asking if any one had any objections. Not a word broke the silence and he declared that silence gave consent. Felecia Langford, evidently had one motive in view: if she could not preside as organist she would leave no stone unturned to prevent another

her superior, from holding the same office.

A few days latter the village club meet in session. At which time Felecia Langford took pleasure in announcing that Popularville now boasted a new organist. If this self-opinionated person thought Merle Maxwell had no friends she was quite mistaken; every lady in the house rose up in defense of one so gentle and pure.

Ere long the facts of these events reached the ears of Merle; and it seemed that she could endure no more. Never had she spoken aught against Felecia Langford or any one. Had she been told that Mrs. Langford was other than a true friend, she would not have believed it. Sincere, honest and frank, was Merle Maxwell, having been taught these true principles from earliest childhood. And she expected the same of others. Not one time in her life had she spoken unkindly to any one; not even a servant. Never had she failed upon the most trying occasions to master her temper.

However, this could not always be true. For one day she met Felecia Langford. And looking upon one who had tried without cause to bring her to humiliation and mortification; one she had trusted as a friend, but now knew to be false and unworthy; her indignation grew more and more intense until almost before she was aware of it, she was standing face to face with her enemy. With unquivering voice she said:

"Mrs. Langford, why have you announced that Miss Amanda Ogilvie has been elected organist in my stead?"

As she adjusted her nose spectacles, Felecia Langford announced in a contemptious tone:

"Because it is true. Mr. Langford is a ruling official and in their last meeting he decided to make the change. You are to continue to play for Sunday school. You can play every Sabbath and Amanda only twice a month, since we do not have preaching more often than that."

"Very well, Mrs. Langford," replied Merle, "I am no child that you should speak to me in that manner. I trust that you and yours will never be treated as you have dealt with me."

Merle went on her way and after she had quelled her feelings, was soon lost in thought. Yes, Adam Langford was an official in the church, but sad the pity. She didn't mind giving up her position. It was not that. But the mere idea of being humiliated in this way and by Felecia Langford, too. But had she committed a wrong in thus speaking to her enemy. Before retiring that night she asked God to forgive her and help her endure her afflictions. She knew that it was impossible to longer conceal her grief and she confided all to her mother, save that other which was breaking her heart day by day—the disappointment in Derris Leroy.

CHAPTER V.

DERRIS Leroy sat in his room. On the marble topped table before him lay numerous letters unopened. He picked them up one by one scanning the postmark of each. Some were business letters; others of little or no importance. These he cast aside. At last his gaze fell upon the familiar manuscript he eagerly sought. Business letters could wait until he enjoyed for a few minutes the contents of one of far more significance than all others.

He tenderly broke the seal and to his utter astonishment, beheld the letter that he had written to Miss Ogilvie as a joke. Now, for the first time his thoughts went back to the letter and joke. Like a thunder-bolt the truth flashed into his mind. He remembered clearly that on the night of his friendly call, his friend had returned to his room on the plea of a forgotten umbrella or something of the kind. Yes, he even thought now of the envelope he had addressed to Merle when he first begun her letter. And this was the explanation of it all. Then he had not given the missing envelope a thought, considering it a mere trivial. As the full situation presented itself clearly to view, with ashen face he exclaimed:

"My God! what have I done?"

For hours he walked back and forth across his room, finally deciding to write her—whom he loved better than life itself—an explanation of the whole affair, making it as plain as it was possible for him to do. As the last sentence was finished he tore the letter into pieces and threw it into the waste basket. She would not believe it; it was all too plain; the letter to Amanda Ogilvie in his own manuscript. No, he had lost all through a few moments of carelessness.

He sat in his chair—how long he knew not—until he heard the familiar tolling of the bell for the Roman Catholic six o'clock mass. Not until then had it occurred to him that he had not slept. His room was in perfect order. His bed had not been touched. He could not, contentedly, go to his work without having made an effort at rectifying the deviation. And once again he formed a letter explaining as best he could, but not one time pleading for himself. No, he would not even ask her to believe him. Oh, the expense of those few moments spent in frivolity! He had lost all that he possessed to make life sweet. Would she believe his word? Did she have sufficient confidence in him to trust him still? Would he ever hear from her again? These and a thousand other questions rushed through his memory. The letter to Amanda Ogilvie was of little consequence as far as the letter itself was concerned. And had Merle Maxwell known him longer he knew that things would be different. As it was she would have just cause to distrust him forever.

He rang the bell and ordered his letter posted. Then, with a broken heart, and a sad, lonely life, pictured in his mind, went to his office without having tasted breakfast. As he walked on, for in his state of utter depsondency he prefered being alone, who was he to meet but his so-called friend who had played so dastardly a trick on him. As nearly as possible Leroy wished him a pleasant "good-morning" in his usual way.

But Mr. Norris, on noticing the unusual paleness of his face and his dejected appearance, stopped suddenly.

"Why, Leroy, have you been ill?"

"No," replied he, "I feel quite well."

Mr. Norris, moved by so sudden a change in his manner, pressed him further.

"Has anything gone wrong? You look as

though you had not slept for days."

While he was thus speaking, Leroy was debating in his mind as to whether he should acquaint him with the intense agitation his mischief-making had inflicted upon him and the girl he so dearly loved. Yes, he would tell him. Perhaps it would cause him to be more thoughtful in the future. And reaching in his waistcoat pocket brought forth the returned letter he had received the previous day. And holding it up in view, said:

"Mr. Norris, this has been a serious joke at my expense. I doubt not that it has separated me forever from one dearer than all else to me."

"My dear Mr. Leroy, accept my apologies," urged Mr. Norris. "I am very sorry indeed that I was not more considerate. I supposed Miss Maxwell to be merely a friend of yours. I am so sorry I mailed the letter. My intention regarding you and your feelings are, I assure you, of the very best. You of all others do not deserve this. I esteem your friendship very highly. Is there anything I can do to rectify this great injury?"

"No," responded Leroy. "I am sure there is nothing. I do not censure you so much. I am first to blame for having been so frivolous as to write the pretended letter to Miss Ogilvie. I must have been out of my reason at the time, for, as you know, I seldom jest with any one. Miss Maxwell is more than a mere friend. She is all to me. Had she known me longer this would be of no consequence.

With a look of gratitude Mr. Norris again begged him to accept his apoligies.

"Yes," assured Leroy as he took Mr. Norris' proffered hand, "and let this be a lesson of thoughtfulness to each of us." And each went to his respective place of business.

All day Mr. Norris deliberated as to what he could do to eliminate his name from the existing perplexities. And as soon as he was free from his duties, he sat down and wrote the following intelligence to Merle Maxwell:

"DEAR MISS MAXWELL:—

I sincerely beg your pardon for mailing to you a letter which Mr. Leroy wrote as a joke. He wrote a letter to Miss Ogilvie on pretence of mailing it to her. And I mailed it to you instead, in an envelope that he had already addressed in your name. I know that it was not his intention that she should ever receive it. I am very sorry to have caused either of you any distress. I only purposed an inoffensive joke on him. In my opinion there is none more worthy and deserving than Derris Leroy. I again beg your pardon and his for any offense, and insist that you believe me.

GASTON NORRIS."

Did he ring the bell and order his letter posted? No, he risked not the most trustworthy servant with this, but went out and mailed himself. Then he knew he had done his best and trusted that all would soon be well with his friend.

To Derris Leroy the days grew longer and longer, as he toiled in his office early and late making out reports, answering various business letters, and seeing to numerous other things that he could trust to no other. Of course he had an assistant, but he was a great believer in the policy that what we do ourselves is alway done. He grew anxious as he waited for a response to his recent letter of explanation. Or, would he ever receive an answer? How he missed her dear letters he was accustomed to receiving. Her letters were always cheerful and inspiring. In his thoughts he could not help comparing her with the fairest of flowers, so pure and gentle was she. He was so glad that she was a true Christian' for every man desires a pure Christian character to rule as queen of his home. He should never forget the earnestness in her tone as she said:

"Derris, be true, first to God and then to me."

And he had promised. Yes, he would forever keep that promise. He would be true to God for her sake; if no other. And here my young lady reader, let me beg of you to live pure unquestionable lives, always. And strive to bring the noble young manhood of our land to know the God of the universe. You can if you but try. There's nothing more commendable in one's life than a pure unquestionable character. And this he knew Merle Maxwell possessed. She was as gentle and as pure as his own dear mother. "Love goes where it is sent" and he believed that their meeting had been providential. And now, even though they were separated forever by a moment of his own folly, he would endeavor to live a life worthy of her alone. Whatever might come, he was glad he had met her. She had inspired him to live more faithfully the teachings of his mother. Perhaps, as his meditation continued, it would have been better for both had he insisted on an early marriage. But no, that was not her wish. And her slightest wish should be granted, so far as it was in his power to bestow. Oh! true love approved of God was forever imprinted upon the heart and memory of Deris Leroy.

CHAPTER VI.

SPRING was far advanced. June, the month of roses, was at hand. And one beautiful day while Mrs. Maxwell and her devoted companion were strolling out through the garden, admiring the various flowers and enjoying the pure gentle breezes, Mr. Maxwell suddenly remarked to his wife:

"My, dear, had it occurred to you that our child's health seems to be failing of late?'

"Yes," returned Mrs. Maxwell, "the sudden change in her manner is almost alarming. Her ailment seems to be due to nervousness. I have also detected a slight lacking in her usual alertness; otherwise I can see no change."

"I have thought," replied her husband, "that perhaps she remains in doors too much of late. She has always enjoyed outdoor sport so much. This is such an ideal day, why not have Mose drive you and her out for a few hours? No doubt it would be refreshing to both."

"You are so thoughtful," responded Mrs. Maxwell. "I was just thinking how I should enjoy driving this afternoon."

While Mr. Maxwell went to order the pony carriage to be in readiness, his companionable wife called to her child.

"All right mother," echoed Merle's sweet voice down the stairway. And soon she was in the presence of her mother, who exclaimed,

"Make ready for a drive, quickly. The carriage is waiting at the front now."

"Oh! mother, what a beautiful afternoon for going out," she said as cheerfully as possible. And presently Mr. Maxwell handed his wife and daughter into the carriage, at the same time cautioning Mose to be very careful in driving. While they were thus enjoying themselves, let us notice another incident that took place at the Maxwell residence during their absence which is apparently of no importance.

Mr. Maxwell returned to his paper and pipe which he had quitted to stroll out in the garden with his wife.

Shortly afterwards at the usual hour the postman could be seen coming into view with the day's latest mail. Usually a servant met him and took the mail in. But very frequently Merle, herself, would run down to the little gate for her letters, so anxious was she to get them. To-day, on seeing no one present he rode up to the letter box and placed therein two letters which bore Merle Maxwell's address.

Madie chanced to see him just as he rode out of sight, and said:

"Miss Merle sho will be dis'pinted agin to-day."

Old Texanna looking up in surprise exclaimed:

"What do you mean, Madie Bryant? When has dat chile been dis'pinted?"

With a triumphant grin Madie replied:

"Just what I done said. Didn't I done see de postman gwine down dat road widout so much as lookin' dis way? And ain't I seen Miss Merle evah day watching for him to bring her a letter from somebody and he ain't done it yit?"

Her anger rising at a servant thus speaking of her "baby," Aunt Texanna said:

"Clear out o' heah, yo' black rebel and mind yo' own business." At the same time pointing her chubby finger at the door through which Madie made her exit, composing and at the same time singing this little ballad:

"Miss Merle's beau is dead and rotten,
And his bones up a trottin'.
Ere her grief is forgotten
Her head will be white as cotton."

"No black niggah can talk about dat sweet chile to Texanna Maxwell." said Aunt Texanna, speaking her thoughts aloud. Madie, just outside, heard this remark and opening the door and peering in said teasingly:

"Talk about the devil and he will disappeah."

"Madie Bryant," snapped Texanna, "what ails yo?"

"Ain't I just now seen Mose drive up to de front and Miss Merle and Missus done comin' up de walk. Wusnt yo' talking 'bout Miss Merle and ain't they just now disappeared?"

Madie closed the door just as Merle came rushing into the room.

"Oh, Auntie, I've had such a pleasant drive." And in the same breath, "did the postman bring any mail today?"

"No, honey," responded Texanna, "Madie says he never even look dis way."

The joyful expression on Merle's sweet countenance died away as she turned and went up to her room. Aunt Texanna sadly shook her kinky head.

Merle keenly felt her disappointment. Today she had felt so hopeful. Something seemed to tell her that she should receive a message that day from Leroy. Intuition had forcibly impressed her that there had been some mistake. She could not censure him. No, she trusted him still. She knew that she could never endure to hear him censured and for that reason she told no one the real cause of her distress. Yes, she withheld this, the only secret in her life, from her mother. She would love and tust him so long as she should live. On her dressing table in a small, oval shaped frame of real ivory, was his photograph which he had given her soon after the time of their engagement. Since then she kept it almost constantly before her. It seemed dearer now than ever before. If they should never meet again, the sweet memory of former days would be a pleasure to her.

Now, she could scarcely hope to hear from him or she should have ere this. She thought, as she continued to meditate that those other perplexities—relating to the church—could be more easily borne with his counsel and kind words of encouragement, and, vice versa, the barrier which had come between her and Derris would not seem quite so burdensome but for the cruel, inhuman backbitings of Felecia Langford. Daily, she read the Bible that her mother had given her in early girlhood, striving more earnestly each day with His help, to live up to its teachings. And with a determination to live above the petty vexations of Felecia Langford and Amanda Ogilvie, she resolved to continue as best she could her duties to the little church of which she was a member.

Having failed in her scheme to displace Merle as church organist, Felecia Langford decided to try another contrivance to mortify and humiliate her. So, accordingly, the following Sabbath she went to the Superintendent of the Sabbath school, at first suggesting and then insisting that the little members of Merle's class be promoted to a higher class, which was taught by Amanda Ogilvie. She had pleaded in a very sanctimonious tone that they were too far advanced to remain longer in Miss Merle's class. It was for the welfare of the children and the betterment of the Sabbath school, etc. At last the Superintendent assented to the change. At once Mrs. Langford went to impart her glad tidings to Amanda Ogilvie, who went immediately to Merle's class distributing her literature, and exultingly announcing to the little juniors that they were, henceforth, to be students of her class. So astonished was Merle that she uttered not a word, but left the little church so dear to her with another cross to bear. How she had merited all this she did not understand. But she knew One who understed and knew all. And to him she would go for courage and comfort. No doubt this project had been carefully planned before these two women had entered church on this Sabbath morning. If they thought to be thus victorious in all their scheming against Merle Maxwell they were mistaken.

While they were now at the church rehearsing some special temperance selections Amanda Ogilvie intimated that Merle was not correctly rendering the accompaniment. Adam Langford seized the opportunity to ask her to let Amanda Ogilvie play it according to her view of reading music. She at once assented. And after Miss Ogilvie, with some difficulty, had concluded the selection before her, Felecia Langford, triumphantly, and in distinct tones that all present might hear, asked aloud of a young lady just entering the pedagogical work, who was also an artist in music and happened to be present, which had played the music correctly. Without hesitating the young lady replied that in her opinion Miss Maxwell had read and played the music correctly. Felecia Langford had hoped and expected her to say that Amanda Ogilvie was correct, thus publicly mortifying Merle. However, she was defeated in this plan and for one time was sorry of her contrivance. Merle Maxwell was ever ready and willing to hear others play. She knew that she was subject to errors, and appreciated advice of others more skilled than herself. She was too well born to be unkind or impolite to anyone. Even those whom she knew would spare no pains to do her an injury. She was sorry for and felt in sympathy with Miss Ogilvie for, of late, she had keenly felt the sense of humilition several times on similar occassions. However, Felecia Langford was not outdone by her present mistake, for after the rehearsal when some one remarked that Miss Maxwell understood music and played well, she responded that she did very well after so much practicing and instruction. What a wonderful world this would be if such characters as Felecia Langford should turn their words of scorn to words of praise !

Charter VII.

THE days lengthened into weeks, weeks into months, and still no tidings of Derris Leroy came to the Maxwell home. Trying indeed were those days for Merle. She had long since ceased pretending to be her former care-free self, but remained in her room more and more as the days went on continually pleading a headache. Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell were alarmed at their daughter's failing health. While Aunt Texanna persisted in silently watching her "baby" and doubtfully shaking her kinky head. Each Sabbath morn required a greater effort to go to the little village church and endure the torture inflicted upon her by the cruel words and deeds of Felecia Langford and her coschemers—her self esteemed husband and Amanda Ogilvie. However"it is a long road that never turns" either for better or worse, and ere long Merle was to receive information concerning Leroy.

All Popularville was up at the crowing of the cock on this extraordinary day designed for its first annual picnic. Never before in its eventful history had it been so alert. It seemed that the entire village and surrounding country, with lunch baskets filled to overflowing, had assembled together beneath one small grove of magnolias. Every one seemed to enter into the festival spirit save one. Merle had almost secretly prayed that her parents would not insist on her accompanying them this day. She could remain at home attended by the servants. She did not know that Mr. Maxwell had ordered Texana with Madie's help to make ready an appetizing lunch fit for a day's outing, at the same time promising the servants the remainder of the day as their own. Even Mose should be free from duty. He, Mr. Maxwell, would drive the pony carriage himself, all on her own account. This pretense at merry making was mockery to her inward feelings.

As soon as opportunity presented itself she slipped away freeing herself of the clattering noise. Now that she was alone what should she do? Where should she go? Her first thought was to hail a passing taxi and speed hurriedly homeward to the quiet of her own room. No, that would never do. Her parents would not understand. And just then spying a path leading out to a small group of trees away from the main grove, turned in that direction. Faster and faster she walked. intent upon spending the few remaining hours alone in the quiet and comfort of these magnificent trees, which seemed to stand there for the solace of aching hearts such as hers. She had always been a dear lover of trees, and now they seemed to be more desirable companions than ever before. She knew that in her present state of despondency she was not pleasing company to anyone.

Thus were her thoughts so engrossed that her name had been spoken the second time ere she realized that she was not alone. And looking up greatly surprised, beheld Mr. Topleitz who at once said:

"I beg pardon, Miss Merle, for intruding. I discovered the little path leading in this direction, and the temptation to stroll out and admire these wonderful trees, also to free myself for a short time of the intolerable noises made by those despicable whistles was too great."

"I, too," responded Merle, "am here for that reason."

Concluding it to be merely a co-incidence, Mr. Topleitz resumed the conversation by asking:

"How is Mr. Leroy? Why are we not honored with his presence on this occasion?"

Merle, answering both questions in one, said:

"He is unable to leave his work at present."

And in a suspecting, but kind tone Mr. Topleitz continued, "Mr. Leroy is, apparently, an excellent young man," emphasizing the "apparently."

Speaking of him in this tone excited suspicion and almost before she knew what she was about, was asking him what he knew about Leroy. Any news was better than none at all, she thought. At first Mr. Topleitz declined. Then, considering her welfare and happiness and esteeming the friendship of her father, said:

"Miss Merle, I have heard that Mr. Leroy is a married man."

She suddenly felt the blood in her veins turn cold. The last remaining color in her face must have died out, for Mr. Topleitz asked:

"Are you ill, Miss Merle?"

"No," she stammered, "I only feel fatigued from the day's outing. I think I shall return to the picnic grounds."

And taking his proffered arm they walked slowly back. And summoning her utmost strength Merle asked:

"Who informed you of this intelligence concerning Mr. Leroy?"

Noticing that Mr. Topleitz hesitated she volunteered:

"I shall never betray your name in this if you prefer."

"In my position," he responded, "I deem it necessary to debar my name from any occurrances of this nature. But knowing you to be true to your word I will disclose the whole truth. It was Miss Ogilvie who informed me and she, I presume, acquired the news through Mrs. Langford."

They had reached the picnic grounds and met Mr. Maxwell, who, after greeting his friend Topleitz turned to Merle and said:

"I have searched this ground half a dozen times for you. Are you ready to return home?"

"Yes, father, I am quite ready," she said.

Once at home and in her room she flung herself across the bed and remained there all night in a swoon.

A few days later she called at the Ogilvie home and inquired for Miss Amanda. When she made her appearance Merle greeted her kindly, as she did every one. Then, just as kindly made known the object of her call by asking her when she received the intelligence that Leroy was a man of family. At which Miss Ogilvie flew into a violent rage.

"Who told you that, Merle Maxwell?" And without waiting for a reply continued, "it was that Topleitz and I know it. How dare he do such a thing?"

After Miss Amanda had given vent to her feelings in a flow of passionate words, Merle calmly remarked:

"Miss Ogilvie, I did not say that Mr. Topleitz was my informant."

"But I know he was," responded Miss Ogilvie indignantly.

"Who else could have told you?" In a kind but decisive tone Merle said, "Miss Amanda, it is immaterial as to when or from whom I heard this. I only wish to know who advised you of this and as nearly as possible the exact words used. Will you be so kind as to tell me."

The temptation was too great. Amanda Ogilvie could not permit this opportunity to go by without the pleasure herself of relating to Merle the existing rumor. And at once changing her tone and manner of disgust and indignation to kindness, replied in a very sympathetic tone:

"My friend, Mrs. Langford told me that he was a man of family. She did not say who told her, and I did not have the impoliteness to ask. I thought of you directly after she told me." And adding in a sneering, tantalizing voice, "I have pittied you so much since hearing the rumor concerning him. I think it so hateful of Mr. Topleitz if it were he who imparted the facts to you."

"Ignoring these pretended, sympathetic remarks, Merle took her leave more bewildered than ever as to what course to pursue. She believed this to be a false report concerning Leroy and that it originated in the Langford home. She wanted so much to efface this from her lost lover's name. But she was utterly helpless to do more. She knew well that Felecia Langford would be the last to enlighten her in the least way. For this she must wait, wait, wait as for other things.

Mr. Topleitz was a man of little more than middle age. Though Mr. Maxwell was a few years his senior the two had been on intimate terms for years, being reared in the same community and as neighbors. It is surprising but suffice to say that one so agreeable and pleasing to look upon remained yet unmarried. He was not a descendant of the German race, as his name implies. But judging from his deep, blue eyes and brown hair, rather Irish. His large, but well proportioned figure was also symbolic of the Irish. It was with the very best of intentions for her welfare that he had recounted to Merle that which Amanda Ogilvie herself had related to him. And this she knew and appreciated. She had promised not to disclose his name in the incident, and this she had kept as nearly as possible. Little did she perceive that Amanda Ogilvie had gone to him in a fit of anger and abused him unreasonably, intimating that Merle had said it was he who had acquainted her of the news. Miss Ogilvie had recently entertained some hope of gaining his favor and the thought of him conversing thus intimately with Merle, added to her already jealous nature, was more than she could endure. And, too, she had been deprived of the pleasure of being first to break the news to her. She anticipated great satisfaction in observing her maneuvers when told of the catastrophe.

It was with much ado that Miss Ogilvie related in detail to Mrs. Langford the interview with Merle, which afforded this hypocritical individual much gratification. In their tete-a-tete Mrs. Langford confidently remarked, as she had to numerous others, that she did not deem it commendable for a young lady, unattended by a chaperon, to quit herself of the picnic and go rambling through the woods with a young man returning at a late hour as Merle Maxwell had done. Did Felecia Langford think that these scandalous rumors would not reach the ears of Merle? No, indeed. This she had purposed in her heart in the beginning.

Day by day the heart of Merle was being crushed. With difficulty she forced herself to attend services at the little church. If she was less true to her church she was not to her God. Oh, how could she endure her afflictions without Him! Felecia Langford might debar her from the church but not from her dear Savior. She found it necessary each day to spend more and more her time in reading her Bible and in secret prayer to endure the things that had come so unexpectedly into her young life. Surely to this cloud there was no "silver lining." Mrs. Langford continued to sit in her pew each Sabbath, wearing the same sanctimonious expression on her contenance and the same nose spectacles. And when Merle was absent, which was a frequent occurrence of late, seating herself at the now almost dilapidated organ and putting into practice her "one and, two and, three and, four and," so distinctly that it was clearly audible to all present, she could see that each blow inflicted upon Merle was having its effect, Thinner and thinner she was growing each day. The roses on her cheeks had all but faded away, leaving the bright light in her large, round eyes brighter still. Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell were frequently holding consultations concerning their child's declining health. But Aunt Texanna had her own thoughts and conceptions of her "baby."

One day Merle chose to walk out among the tall cotton-woods in the background of her home. Near the old-fashioned vine covered well, she found Aunt Texanna with her chubby hands folded leisurely across her lap, vigorously rocking to and fro, humming softly to herself. Merle seated herself at the old darkey's feet and rested her tired, aching head upon her lap. Then kindly asked:

"Auntie. why are you always so happy?" The old family negro patted her, sympathetically, on her brow and tenderly replied:

"Chile, yo' old Auntie ain't always happy when she sees her baby lookin' pale like dis. Marser Leroy is comin' by'n by."

At this assertion Merle raised her head in surprise. "Why Aunt Texanna; how do you know that he is ever coming?"

"Cause I done been askin' de good Lawd to send him back hyeh and he's nevah dis'pinted dis ole niggah yit. When yo' pa waz burnin' up wid fever and about to die, long fo' yo' ma come to live hyeh, I asked de Lawd to make him get well. And ain't he done it?"

"Yes, Auntie," was all Merle said. And the old darkey continued as to herself:

"Some day Marser Leroy's comin' back and my baby's going to be so happy. And dat hateful Missus Langford what holds a high head is sho gwine ter beg de Lawd to fo'give her some of dese times fo' de way she's abused dis hyeh chile. De Lawd will sho punish her fo' makin' de innocent suffer. Dere's One whut understands dis ole niggah's heart. An' purty soon her prayers gwine to come true."

Just then Merle raised her head and rubbing her eyes, exclaimed:

"Oh, Auntie, I've had such a wonderful dream!"

Aunt Texanna, now aroused from her musing, said. "Go 'long, baby, into de house. It's time I's gettin' dinnah fo' dat hungry pa ob yo's."

As Merle started indoors she looked back over her shoulder and asked, "Won't you make me some caramels, Auntie?"

"Dat I will honey," adding to herself, "fust time she's asked me to make her anything special since de Lawd only knows when."

As the old servant arose from her chair rubbing her rheumatic limbs at the same time calling:

"Madie, Madie Bryant, git yo' black self to de kitchen. Whut yo' been out dere cotin' Mose fo' any how?"

Madie had not served in the Maxwell home long. Of recent years it had become necessary for Aunt Texanna to have an assistant. And Madie answered the purpose, so far, fairly well. Though Texanna frequently reminded her that she, herself, was Texanna Maxwell, and that she, Madie, was only Madie Bryant.

However mischievous Madie might have been she loved her young mistress. And it was with a heart full of anticipation of joy and surprise for milady that she received a letter in the late afternoon mail addressed to her and postmarked "Mayfield." As Madie laid the bulk of mail on the dinner table she carefully placed this letter on top where it was plainly visible. Then skipped back to the kitchen singing as she went:

"Miss Merle's beau is not dead and rotten
And his bones up a trottin';
Her head won't be white as cotton
For her grief is forgotten."

Texanna was just then too busy with her

"baby's" caramels to notice or reprove her.

A short time afterwards as the trio seated themselves at dinner, Merle, on seeing her letter, just as Madie had anticipated, seized it and with eager trembling hands severed the seal with the little pearl handled letter opener. She knew from her dream that soon she was to have good news, but was not expecting it quite so soon. After reading the letter she silently laid it on the table. The bright light that had a moment before adorned her sweet face vanished. Noticing that her daughter had finished her letter, Mrs. Maxwell asked in her usual, kind wav:

"And what news you have you to-day, my dear?"

"Nothing, mother," responded Merle, "just an invitation from Ida Harwood to attend her house-party next week."

Mrs. Maxwell, surprised at her child's manner, exclaimed, "Nothing! An invitation to spend a few days in Mayfield and from your dearest and most intimate girl friend? Of course you will accept."

Just then Mr. Maxwell, between bites of white bread and veal loaf, remarked with a twinkle in his eye: "I am sure it will not be necessary to insist much on her making a visit to Mayfield." At this allusion she replied:

"I do not really care to go, father." Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell exchanged knowing glances. And after much persuasion she consented to go.

The following few days were spent in making the necessary preparations. With a heavy heart she went to the dressmaker. Because her mother insisted that she have a new evening gown of blue satin charmeuse combined with georgette, as becoming to her fair but now delicate complexion. Oh, why had she ever consented to go when she so much preferred remaining at home in quietude? How could she go to Mayfield—his home? The place that they had once planned for their home.

The last desired article neatly packed and her toilet completed, she dismissed the servant and stood for a few brief moments before her dressing table gazing intently upon the photograph in the little ivory frame. Then, as if speaking her thoughts aloud, said, "Dear Derris, auf wiedersehen (Farewell.)" Then after bidding her parents an affectionate goodbye and speaking a kind word to each of the servants, stopping to speak a few words of comfort to Aunt Texanna, she was driven to the station by Mose. Upon dismissing him she gave a silver half dollar and directed him to hasten home, which he did, praising her all the while. Not a servant in the Maxwell home but who would willingly obey her slightest command.

Arriving at Mayfield, Merle was met at the station by her old school chum and friend, Ida Harwood, accompanied by several girl friends, who gave her a hearty welcome to their circle and gladly numbered her with them. She was the last of the invited guests to arrive. And chattering merrily the girls turned in the direction of the Harwood's beautiful home. Presently, Ida addressed Merle and asked her if she had recently been ill adding that she looked unusually pale. She responded that she felt quite as well as usual, only fatigued from the days journey. This put her more on her guard and she made a greater effort to enter into the spirit of the occasion. After a few minutes motoring they were in the hospitable home of their hostess.

After consenting to her parents' wishes of making this short visit Merle had debated in her mind if it would be right to pretend that she was happy and enjoying the hospitalities of her friend when she knew that she was not. But she had had no excuse to offer. The world must never know that she had unreservedly given her heart to Leroy and he had proved untrue. Ah! this attempt at pretense was hard for one who had never been anything but her natural, care-free self.

CHAPTER VIII.

DERRIS Leroy rumaged through his numerous collection of books. And selecting his favorate edition de luxe, seated himself for the evening and endeavored to thus quiet his disturbed state of mind. But, try as he might, his thoughts were centered elsewhere. After rising and walking the length of his room several times, he stopped before a table heaped with papers read and reserved for future reference. Others were various sample copies that he had not had time to look inside their covers. Paper after paper he tossed aside until he noticed a copy of the "Popularville Times." Wondering who was so kind and thoughtful of him he again seated himself and began perusing its contents. What was that? Again he read in the social column:

"Miss Merle Maxwell entertained a childhood schoolmate and friend (?) last evening. He and she had not met before since their school days."

The journal slipped from his hands unheeded. His head was bent in an attitude of deep thought. She had not believed and accepted his explanation. This schoolmate she had entertained was, no doubt, a chilhood sweetheart. And believing Leroy to be untrue she would turn to him for consolation in her disappointment and grief. He knew that she had once loved him with pure, unreserved love, such as one of her gentle nature could love. Would she detest him now, or did true love such as her's ever turn to hate? He did not censure her if she should scorn him. Oh, the battle was hard and of long duration, but was finally fought. He must be content to live a lonely, solitary life. And there alone with God, he prayed that she, his first and only love, might be protected and guided to the path that leads to her happiness.

With a tired, worn expression on his face, that had seemingly aged in a single evening, he rang the bell and ordered tea. Had Amanda Ogilvie seen him on this occasion she should have been free from suspense. For the sleepless nights of planning and scheming had had the desired effect, save for the fact that it did not in the least, turn his thoughts toward her or any other. The thought of another ever to take her place in his heart was furthest away. Though Merle was forever lost to him, she would henceforth, be an example of purity and fidelity to him.

More and more each day he became absorbed in business affairs. Diligently performing his office duties during the day while, evening after evening was spent in careful study.

"Yes, I can do it," he said, with an expression of determination, half aloud and half to himself, after an evening of unusually hard thinking. The plan of the invention was formed in his mind. Now to procure the necessary material and bring his conceptions to view. To accomplish this meant late hours of toil but it was worthy of the sacrifice. Others had discovered inventions. And by perseverence, he, too, could attain success.

Months before this he had purchased a beautiful home site for the purpose of building their home, near the church of her choice, because this would please Merle. And now his only recreation was to steal away there and cultivute and grow the flowers and trees that he had planted for her. She had wanted a flower garden with narrow walks leading through it and a lawn shaded with beautiful trees. O, it was a pleasure to beautify this home according to her views. But he could not dare to go there to live without her.

Each tender flower reminded him of her purity and gentleness.

To him the Sabbath was the most trying of all the days. Not because it was the Sabbath, no, indeed. But because his thoughts and hands were unoccupied by the material things of his daily routine of business affairs And, in defiance of all efforts to be content, his thoughts lingered on the happiness that might have been his. Such a trivial incident had separated them, but dear reader:

'Tis the little deeds of wrong
  Fanned into flames so bright.
That blight the hearts of throngs
  And leaves the soul less light.

Each Sabbath morning found him fulfilling his promise to Merle by occupying his pew in the church, usually accompanied by his mother.

It will be remembered that in the beginning of this story, after the death of his father, his mother had gone to live with an only daughter, who, with her family, resided in Mayfield. Oak Lawn was a beautiful, spacious home and Leroy was not permitted to even suggest engaging a suit of rooms elsewhere. His sister's family was composed of herself, husband and two bright eyed children. Frederick, Jr., a sturdy little fellow, and Idell, a rosy cheeked little girl.

Dinner had been served and the household had assembled in the blue drawing-room, a usual custom in the Worthington home, for a few hours before retiring to their respective rooms. Mrs. Worthington seated herself at the piano and softly played the accompaniment while she sang in a clear, cultured voice a few favorite selections. While her husband stood by her side with a look of admiration on his face. Presently, their attention was drawn to the children by Idell's peals of laughter. Master Freddie was striding back and forth across the room in a very pompous manner with head and shoulders thrown back and his Uncle Derris's hat set on the back of his head. And with his father's violin bow across his shoulder was making a fair attempt at imitating a marching soldier.

Thinking that perhaps Annibel and Fred would enjoy an evening alone with their children, and because his mother needed the refreshing breezes, Leroy turned to her and asked in his kind, manly tone:

"Mother, would you enjoy a stroll among the oaks this evening? It is not yet dusk and I think we should both enjoy the gentle breezes."

A smile played upon her sweet face as she replied:

"My dear son, I love nature in all its beauty, and nothing would give me more pleasure than a short stroll with you, my child." And placing her arm within his own he led her out through the garden and on and on to a settee beneath a magnificent oak tree. Then motioning her to sit down he took his seat beside her, at the same time breaking the silence by speaking his thoughts aloud:

"It is sweet to live, even in loneliness."

"Yes, dear son, life is sweet if we make it so. Our dear Savior has made it possible for all who will to be happy by trusting to Him every sorrow and disappointment. When we fail to pray and trust 'tis then life goes wrong. But why your loneliness, dear son, when you have everything before you—youth, a successful business career and, most of all, One to guide you day by day? You haven't lost a dear companion and seen two sweet little babes laid to rest as I have done."

"No, mother," Leroy said, "I have never experienced the latter. Though I have lost through a few moments of folly, the dear one whom I had chosen for a life comrade. If I had your faith I could hope some day to be content without her. I would willingly sacrifice everything I have accumulated to only have her back."

His mother kindly interrogated him further:

"Who is this one you speak of, and how did you come to lose her? I am sure you were never guilty of an indiscreet deed."

"You have never met her, mother," he said. "I can only tell you that she is the purest and gentlest girl on earth. I met her at Popularville when I paid Latney a few day's visit, you remember? I played a foolish joke on a boy friend soon after and he turned the jest on me in a manner that enveloped her. I wrote an explanation but she did not believe me."

"I know that she is sweet and fair," his mother replied, "and surely there is an error somewhere. And, dear boy, let us pray and trust that some day it will be eliminated."

He drew her mantle closer about her slender shoulders and said:

"Sweet mother, I would have sought your counsel and kind words of consolation ere this, only for your own griefs."

"My heart is never too burdened with cares and sorrow to help share your troubles, my child."

Leroy took his mother in his strong arms and tenderly showered kisses upon her brow.

"Come, mother; it is time you were in sweet dreamland. See, the moonbeams are playing through the branches of these great oaks."

And the two walked back happier than they had been for months.

Now that Leroy had confided all to his dearest friend on earth his heart seemed lighter, and he worked, if possible, more diligently than before on his invention. It was more difficult than he had thought but not for a moment did he entertain a thought of giving up. He realized that it would consume time and perhaps cost no small amount of money. But if it should be a success it would be a fortune and, vice versa, if it should be a failure—well his evenings were his own to spend as he elected. And he could afford to spend a reasonable amount of money in the attempt. Once coming to a decision he was not one to turn back. "Perseverence" had been his motto. Otherwise he could not have been thus far successful.

Evening after evening he excused his presence in the drawing-room on plea of important business matters. He had just entered his room and settled himself to work, when a servant came up and announced "a gentleman." Leroy looked at the card a moment then said:

"Show him in, Williams. I will be down presently."

As he glanced at the bulk of unopened mail on his desk he thought of another evening when he had had two gentlemen friends shown up to his room. As he went in to greet Mr. Norris he could not help reflecting upon the things that might have been but for that one memorable evening.

The formal greeting over, Mr. Norris at once introduced the motive of his presence by asking:

"You have heard the latest social news of Mayfield—the house party at the Harwood home?"

"No," responded Leroy, "I have not been advised of the intelligence. In fact my work demands so much of my time that my social pleasures are very limited. I should not have been so stupid had I been more observant of the social columns of the diurnals."

"My dear Leroy," observed Mr. Norris, "I fear you adhere to your business affairs too closely. Diligence is very commendable to one but all need recreation and diversion. One would think that 'pleasures come when we seek them in the right spirit; or it may be opportunities and we accept them while they offer the time and things which make us happy.' You have, no doubt, received an invitation to dine with Miss Harwood and her young friends to-morrow at five-thirty o'clock?"

"That I cannot answer," replied Leroy, "I have not yet viewed to-day's mail. The Harwood's are of a noble and respectable family, and will spare no pains in the comforts and pleasures of their guests, I am sure.." He stopped to order cigars and then continued: "My work ceases to be a duty but rather a pleasure. In previous years I was compelled to cleave to duties and now it is preferable. I was not destined to be among the more fortunate who were born with silver spoons in their mouths."

"My dear Leroy, it is not always fortunate to be born with a silver spoon in your mouth," rejoined Mr. Norris. "Our noblest and most worthy men are those who have labored in defiance of difficulties, conquering pride and finally reaching the purposed goal. We are disposed to think that the things most difficult to attain afford the most pleasures. And you of all others deserve happiness and enjoyment beyond business concerns." And going back to the object of his call continued: "Miss Harwood informed me that you should receive an invitation and of course you will accept?"

Leroy humorously replied:

"I appreciate the beautiful bouquets you have so lavishly conferred upon me. However, I am afraid I must decline the invitation, since I have a business engagement for tomorrow evening."

"Come, Leroy," insisted Mr. Norris, "accept just this once. Can the engagement not be deferred to another time?"

"No," answered Leroy, kindly but decisively. "It is of such a nature to require immediate consideration; and duty before pleasure you know."

Mr. Norris continued to urge:

"Your esteemed presence will be greatly missed by all. Miss Harwood will be very much disappointed. It was she who requested me to insist on your going. You know Ida and I have been friends for some time?"

"I am sorry indeed," said Leroy, regretfully, "that circumstances are not such that I can be present on this especial occasion. Miss Harwood is indeed, a very commendable young lady."

"Leroy," continued Mr. Norris, as he arose to go, "there is among the Harwood guests one of the fairest and most beautiful that eyes ever beheld. There is visible in the large, soft, brown eyes a sadness. And beyond the attempt to be light-hearted, can be detected in the sweet face, some hidden sorrow."

"I know," responded Leroy, that Miss Harwood would have for guests none other than those of noble and respectable birth. Give her my regards. I shall send apologies on the morrow."

And Mr. Norris made his departure.

Leroy returned to his room and resumed his work. Tempus fugit, for those whose hands and thoughts are diligently occupied. The hours had extended far into the night ere he laid aside his work to retire, think you? No, to view his mail, and perceiving Miss Harwood's invitation wrote a reply. Then retired for a few hours of much needed sleep.

The following day he had been detained at his office until late in the afternoon and was hurrying on his way home to dinner—for six o'clock was the usual dinner hour in the Worthington home and when that hour arrived dinner was served, since the inmates of this home were as punctual to meals as to a business engagement—when he observed by the wayside a poor, unfortunate cripple. Some cruel, inhuman being had trodden him down and had left him to grope his way alone. A pitiable picture indeed, was this forlorn, miserable creature in mean attire. Derris Leroy always had time to comfort the unfortunate. And stopping, spoke a few encouraging words, gave him the price of several night's lodging and ordered him conveyed to a comfortable inn. Then hastened his footsteps homeward.

Reaching home he was met at the door by Mrs. Worthington who exclaimed a bit reprovingly:

"Watever has kept you thus, my brother? Dinner has been served an hour since."

"I was detained both at the office and on the way home, sister," returned Leroy kindly.

"And Derris," continued Mrs. Worthington, hurtfully, "Eloise Parker, my dearest girl chum, came over to spend the day with me and looked so disappointed when you failed to be present at dinner."

"I am sorry, indeed," responded Leroy. "I meant no offense to Miss Parker, nor you, dear sister. I was detained on matters of importance."

"I promised Eloise the pleasure of your company home if she would remain the evening. Was I right?"

"Yes, I will accompany her home," responded Leroy, "as soon as I've had a bite to eat."

"You're a dear good brother," remarked Mrs. Worthington over her shoulder, as she turned to go back to her neglected guest.

After dinner had been served him, Leroy joined the family and Eloise Parker in the drawing-room. Presently Eloise arose to go. Leroy proposed motoring her home but his sister suggested that it was a propitious evening for walking. To which Eloise readily agreed, and they set ouu.

Mrs. Worthington little dreamed that her brother anticipated several hours of work in his room before retiring. He escorted Miss Parker home just as he would any of his sister's friends or any one who needed protection. To Eloise it was the happiest walk that she had ever experienced. Her happiest moments were when in his presence. Mrs. Worthington and Eloise had been intimate friends since their girlhood days. Annibell had met Cupid's fate early, marrving "the best boy in the world" and leaving Eloise to "single blessedness." Nothing would have been more gratifying to Mrs. Worthington than to have witnessed her brother's marriage to Eloise. And her view of the idea? Eloise Parker was was one among many who would have welcomed his attentions. Mrs. Worthington knew Eloise to be well born and possessor of a pure, sweet character, if not a beautiful face. And considered her an agreeable companion for her brother. Miss Parker remained unmarried from choice, or, rather because Derris Leroy had not offered himself to her in marriage. If she did not possess a beautiful face her manners were pleasing and agreeable.

On and on they walked, conversing on various topics. Who were they about to meet? A group of merry girls and boys. As they passed by Leroy raised his hat in due respect but almost let it fall in astonishment. Could the pale, sweet faced girl whose arm Norris held be Merle Maxwell? Leroy accompanied Eloise to her, home, then walked slowly back to the home of his sister.

CHAPTER IX.

THE Harwood home was a scene of pleasure and excitement this beautiful evening. Bright lights could be seen from every window at an early hour. The doors of the spacious east parlor were thown open. Above in the dressing rooms were light-hearted girls making their toilets for the evening, chattering gaily all the while. Each girl's hair had been dressed in the fashion most becoming to the individual. A beautiful scene, indeed, were these bright, happy-faced girls in their young womanhood, attired in lovely evening costumes.

The excitement brought roses even to the cheeks of Merle Maxwell as they stood in a group, first praising their hostess, then uttering exclamations of joy at their anticipated pleasures of the evening. Ida had invited as many gentlemen friends as there were girls. They were to attend the Garden Theatre and see a photo drama of creation, earth from its beginning to the present time. Merle had enjoyed things of this nature when she was in school at ———Va., but Popularville afforded, practically, no amusements. She was charming indeed. Her wealth of hair brought back loosely from her fair face and done low on her neck. She would have been as light-hearted as the merriest, but for that one"empty, aching void"in her heart.

"But the most exciting feature of the occasion," exclaimed one of the group, "is that the young men are to choose 'milady' after their arrival,"

"O, I hope Mr. Leroy choses me," cried Lucy."

"I was just thinking that of myself," saucily replied Maud.

"If this were leap year," ventured Nell, "I should hasten down and ask the pleasure of his company ere you were aware of the fact."

Merle, alone, remained silent, but her cheeks had deepened to a crimson flush.

"Come, girls," said Ida, regretfully, "I am afraid we shall not be honored with Mr. Leroy's presence this evening. An important business engagement keeps him away."

"How unfortunate for us," ejaculated the girls almost in one breath.

Vera, the jolliest of the bunch and always on the alert exclaimed:

"O, girls, Mr. Norris next for me."

"Vera, you forget Ida," responded Maud.

"Of course Ida is his preference," continued Lucy. And Ida silently thought so too, but said aloud:

"Oh, girls, I have an idea! Lest I should be entirely excluded," and walking over to a table, picked up paper and pencil and asked Merle to write the names of each present, while she skipped away, returning presently with a neat little sewing basket, in which she put the slips of paper and while shaking the basket vigorously, remarked:

"We shall leave it all to fate."

"That is best of all," agreed all the girls.

Just then footsteps were heard on the paved walk below, and the girls descended to the east parlor where the young men awaited them.

After much hilarity over the drawing of the contents of the little basket the duodecim set off for the Garden Theatre. Each were elated over their "destined fate." Especially Mr. Norris who had, much to his satisfaction, drawn Merle's name. As for her she had no preference. The young men were all Ida's friends and acquaintances. Her heart held only one true love and that had been given another. The light-hearted youths were delighted with the entertainment, uttering exclamations of joy and surprise at the *dramatis personae* save one. All was invisible to Merle save the manly form of Derris Leroy and a happy-faced girl walking by his side. Several times during the evening Mr. Norris was forced to repeat his remarks and questions, only to be answered in a listless tone. Oh, how she wished that she had never come to this place! How could she stay the few remaining days of her visit?

The hour for retiring came as a welcome to her. The inmates of the Harwood home were in slumber save her and Ida. One little guessing the cause of the other's restlessness, the two arose and throwing mantles over their shoulders, descended to the library with the intention of "reading themselves to sleep."

One selected a beautiful edition of a favorite author; the other took up an old family bible. And settling themselves comfortably the two began reading. Since coming to Mayfield, Merle had neglected her daily reading and welcomed this opportunity to read a few passages of the Book which had become such a comfort to her. A pleasing picture indeed were these two who were almost rivals in beauty. And yet, such a contrast between the soft, brown eyes which spoke volumes, the dark, brown hair now hanging loosely over her fair shoulders, clustering in curls around the sweet face of Merle Maxwell, and the almost perfect brunette by her side, with dark but clear olive complexion, copious braids of very dark hair and eyes almost as dark. The even features on the round, full face were faultless. A scene fit to grace the canvas of the most skilled artist were these two girls as they sat with opened books in their hands unconscious of their loveliness.

Presently, Ida closed her book and turning to her companion asked:

"Do you find pleasure in the reading of those pages?"

Merle looked up in surprise at the question.

"Yes, I find much more pleasure and comfort in this book than all others. To the weary, lonely and oppressed are sweet promises of comfort and sheltering love. Dear Ida, have you never felt the need of One infinitely more superior?"

"Yes," admitted Ida, "and I only wish I I knew that One as you do."

"You may by simply trusting all to Him," continued Merle, "and believing implicitly in the words of this Book." Then turning to the twenty-fourth verse of the fifth chapter of John read the sweet promise to those who hear His word and believe."

"But my past wrongs?" Ida inquired earnestly. Merle, as she turned to the seventh verse of the fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah, said:

"Repent of your sins, Ida, though they be great or small." And again she read the word of God to the one she loved dearly as a sister. When she had finished, Ida continued to inquire.

"Will He pardon all of my carelessness and indifference towards Him?"

"Yes, willingly," replied Merle. "Dear Ida, your part is to repent, believe and confess Him." Again she let the word of God speak for itself by pointing out the ninth and tenth verses of the tenth chapter of Romans.

"I am sorry for the indifferent life I have lived, for my sins of commission and omission," continued Ida, "and I believe in the saving power of Jesus but—

"Just one more step," pleaded Merle.

"Accept the third verse of the twentysixth chapter of Isaiah and trust." She repeated the verse slowly and forcibly. Then, unmindful of her own distress, kneeled beside her loved one and asked God to bless her humble effort, and: "Help Ida to trust now." Rising, she said:

"Dear Ida, whosoever will may know this dear Savior." Her eyes filling with tears of gratitude and thankfulness, Ida responded:

"I know," and a new light illumed her sweet face.

"Merle," continued Ida, "nothing can come to sever my love and friendship for you."

"Nor mine for you," responded Merle,as she entwined her arm around her chum's waist. And the two returned to their room at a very late hour.

The few remaining days of the house-party Mr. Norris was constantly by Merle's side. He walked with her in the garden, stood by her side when she sang, and when they motored to Club Lake it was he who first asked her to share his seat. Unconsciously Merle was inflicting upon her dearest girl friend a similar picture to that one imprinted indelibly upon her memory on the evening that she had first attended the Garden Theatre party with Norris. For Ida could not fail to notice the expression of joy that lighted up his handsome face when in Merle's presence. That Ida and Mr. Norris were congenial friends Merle knew. But of her deep, pure love for him Ida had never spoken. Without a murmur Ida noted the endearing looks bestowed upon Merle by Norris and silently watched him slipping away to one who could never love him as she had done. Ah, more than that, to one who could never entertain a thought beyond that of an esteemed friend. All this Merle knew and neither by word nor deed encouraged his attention. Could she have loved other than Derris Leroy it surely would have been Mr. Norris, who, if not given so much to business concerns, was little less sagacious and altogether pleasing to look upon. He was, no doubt, next to Leroy the most esteemed of all the young manhood of Mayfield. Ah, did Ida Harwood realize the true meaning of her words when she entered the covenant with Merle Maxwell that nothing could come to sever their ties of love and friendship?

CHAPTER X.

AALL night and until the early morning hours had dawned Gaston Norris walked the college campus. To-night the beauty of the magnificent oaks was as unheeded by him as the tender blades of grass that he was unconsciously trampling under foot. On these grounds he had met Ida and a dear, good friend she had been. Yes, he had admitted to himself that he had entertained a thought deeper than that of mere friendship. But these thoughts he had disclosed to no one. And now he was glad for she would, henceforth, be second in his heart. To woo and win Ida Harwood would be an honor to anyone. Why could he not shake off this indescribable feeling which had so suddenly changed his heart? Never before had he experienced a similar sensation. Could this fair queen, who had so completely filled his heart and thoughts recently, be the Merle Maxwell that his friend Leroy had spoken of? If so, had he a right to try to win her love? Ah, could he if he tried? Should he ever again look into those wonderful eyes and listen to her clear, sweet voice in song?

All too soon the week of recreation and enjoyment in the Harwood home had come to an end. It was amid tears of love, friendship and regret that the girls separated from their hostess. Vera wittily prophesied that next time Mr. Norris would draw her name, at which Maud gave her a reproving look. And Lucy and Nell declared the manifestation to be of a selfish motive. Merle was the last to bid her hostess goodby. And as she embraced her, whispered gently:

"Remember me in your prayers, dear Ida."

"I beg the same of you," earnestly responded Ida. And the two girls separated.

Taking Ida's arm, Gaston Norris accompanied her home from the station. For some moments they walked in silence. Ida was first to speak.

"I wonder why Mr. Leroy did not attend my house party? He allows his work to consume entirely too much of his time."

"He purposed no offense whatever, Ida," asserted Mr. Norris.

"He didn't intend to of course, Gaston, but I so much wanted him to meet my girl friends. And, vice versa, I was anxious for them, especially Merle, to meet him. But I know he is very diligent."

"Has Miss Merle Maxwell ever met Leroy, Ida?"

"If so, I am not aware of the fact. Why should you suspect that they have met, Gaston?"

"I only thought it probable." And with

some relief Norris continued: "Miss Maxwell is indeed charming and refined. But why sometimes, the sad, thoughtful expression?"

"That is easily explained," responded Ida. "Rather a long story, but if you care to listen I shall acquaint you with the facts. Merle Maxwell is the dearest and fairest girl in the world."

Just then they turned in at Ida's home. They seated themselves on the shaded door-steps and Mr. Norris remarked:

"Ida, I am an attentive listener."

"Gaston, I am connected with part of this story which I am about to relate—"

"Which makes it more interesting" finished Norris.

Ida, somewhat reassured continued:

"Well, to begin at the beginning, Merle is well born."

"Her placid behavior bespeaks as much," affirmed Norris.

"Merle," resumed Ida, "has been reared by

Christian parents. O, that my own dear mother had been spared me that I might have been taught the true way of life earlier! Merle has been taught fidelity to home and church since early childhood. She loves her church and delights in its work. But recently, and without cause, there has come one to oppose her in her every effort; one, who, with her two or three co-schemers, has contrived by cruel words and deeds to drive her from the church."

"How dare they!" ejaculated Mr. Norris.

"Is that not enough to crush one of her gentle nature? Is that not just cause for the sometimes thoughtful, deliberate expression? To us, who have lived indifferently to Deity, it seems a mere trifle. But to one who has loved and served a work as Merle Maxwell has done, it is burdensome and grievous. She scarcely resembles the Merle Maxwell of our college days. Then, she was the happiest and most care-free of all the girls. Gaston, this is confidentially. It was only after I had interrogated her concerning the great change in her manner that she acquainted me with these few facts. For she is not one to complain or censure."

"You may trust me, Ida," said Norris, but I should like to see those contemptible characters receive their just dues."

"Such persons do get their just dues sooner or later, Gaston," replied Ida.

"But how are you connected with this occurrence, Ida?

"In the most serious way, Gaston. You know that my dear mother was taken from me while I was yet a mere child. And stepmothers, especially with children of their own, never have much time to spare for the welfare and training of their stepchildren. And, udtil recently, I have lived indifferent to God and the things so sacred and reverenced by my dear, departed mother. Oh, the times that I have wished for some one to lead me to the right way of life! And not long since there came a time when I felt stealthily creeping into my life a—something that would call forth the aid of a Divine power. And Merle, a Divine messenger from Heaven, patiently, step by step, directed me to her Savior."

"Go on, Ida" persisted Norris.

"It was when I recounted to her some of the obstacles in my path—for it had seemed to me that she had never had aught to mar her life and change the once rosy cheeked, care free Merle Maxwell to the pale faced girl that she now is—that she informed me of the cross she was called to bear."

"I should like to throttle the one who dared to oppose her noble efforts!" again ejaculated Mr. Norris.

"In that case," continued Ida, "you would greatly displease Merle, for not one evil would she have inflicted upon her enemies. Oh, that I could bear my cross in that similitude!"

"Ida," said Mr. Norris, "it is the false pretenders to peity, and characters of such as you have just spoken, who are barring thousands from the church who would be a power in its work."

"Yes," admitted Ida, "such persons do prevent the progress of the church, but even they should not prevent our serving the Creator of the universe."

"You are right about that, too, Ida," responded Norris. "And I am truly glad that you have entered this new life. I hope to attempt it myself sometime."

"I wish you would, Gaston," Ida said as he rose to go. And she went in to reflect on recent events.

With window shades drawn close and lights burning low, Mr. Leroy worked on, eventually coming to a pause. Certain necessary material must be procured ere the procedure of his work. He consulted his watch, only seven-thirty. Why the evening was no more than half spent, besides, Webb &Company always kept late hours in an evening. He would go down at once and order through them the necessities from the manufactory. And carefully putting aside his work went out.

His business transacted, and his head bent low in meditation, he had turned his footsteps homeward, when to his surprise, he came upon Eloise Parker, Mr. Worthington and Annibel coming out of the Garden Theatre.

"Derris," exclaimed Mrs. Worthington, "where have you been keeping yourself this evening? We were just wishing for you. Eloise came over for the afternoon and I insisted that she remain the evening, promising her an escort home."

"I shall accompany her home, Annibel," replied her brother.

"Mr. Leroy, I fear this is an imposition on you," suggested Eloise.

"Not at all" responded Leroy. And taking her arm they started off. They had only gone a few paces when they met Mr. Norris, who asked:

"How is the drama this evening?"

And Leroy waited for Eloise to answer.

Chapter XI.

THE morning dawned clear and bright. The sun was rising over the eastern hills. And with it rose the inmates of the Maxwell home. Breakfast was over at an early hour. Early rising had long been an habitual custom in this house.

"The way some folks sleep away the early morning hours," remarked Uncle Tim "is disgusting."

Mrs. Maxwell, a smile playing over her sweet face, was quietly directing and assisting in the morning's housework.

The last dish polished and put away, Aunt Texanna donned a freshly starched and ironed checked apron, and tying a spotless bandana on her head completed her toilet. Her "baby" had been gone a whole week and to-day she was coming home. The old darky mused to herself. She would cook her most "favor-ite" dishes for dinner.

"Bless her heart."

"Wuz yo' talkin' to me," called out Madie from an adjoining room where she was sweeping and dusting vigorously.

"Jest min' yo' own bizziness and let dis happy niggah alone, Madie Bryant," retorted Texanna.

After tying the bright red tie in a flourishing bow-knot, which he had recently purchased with the silver coin which Merle had given him on the morning of her departure, Mose led the ponies out to the carriage. He brushed and curried them as sleek as the as the sleekest. And after much ado over dusting and arranging the seat cushions, drove pompously off to the little village station. It was impossible to perceive as to whom he most desired a display of his new tie, "Miss Merle" or Madie. To Mose it seemed that "that" train would never arrive. He believed that "Miss Merle's" ponies could beat it. He'd a notion to go and meet it.

Just then the train pulled in, the enormous engine puffing and whistling. Mose retreated to the farthest side of the station platform and remained until it pulled out. Then, straightening out the bows of his muchly prized tie, walked up to Merle with a broad smile on his face to take her baggage. In all earnestness Merle exclaimed:

"I am so glad to see you, Mose." Then suppressing the smile that for a moment adorned her sweet face, continued, "and where did you get your new tie?"

With the smile overspreading his face, Mose responded as he untied the ponies:

"Dis is a present from yo'self, Miss Merle."

"A present from me, Mose?" she exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes'um, de money whut yo' give me bought dis very tie, Miss Merle."

"How nice," acquiesced Merle.

Soon they were at home. Merle ran up the gravel walk and into the open arms of her mother, who was standing in the door waiting to greet her. Uncle Tim said, as he patted her affectionately, on the shoulder:

"We've been lonesome without our little girl."

From her parents she went to Texanna, who had advanced as far as the door.

"Lor', honey, yo' don,t look much mended."

"I am well, Auntie," reassured Merle as she ascended the steps to her room.

Everything was just as she had left it. The little ivory frame which contained the likeness of Leroy had not stirred from its resting place on the dressing table. Without removing hat or gloves she clasped it to her bosom

"Oh, had we never met to part in this way! Would that I had not lived to see the day you proved untrue to me! Yet I love you. And would this moment sacrifice my life to know that you were not false to me and your promises. It has often been said that to part with loved ones in death is the hardest trial we have to endure. But O, to give them up in life—and perhaps to another—is worse than death. Ah, dear Derris, I could have better stood by your open grave and listened to the cold clods as they rolled in upon you! Then I would have known that you were waiting in a better world to welcome me, where we would never, never part. What have I to hope for here? Nothing but an empty, aching void, that nothing but your love can fill." As she sat there alone, the forbidden tears coursed down her cheeks for the first time in all the long months of her trials. Oh, without him life would be a lonely dreary march! Ah! would death be a welcome visitor at this moment?"

"Dear Derris, I love you better than you know," she thought to herself as she tenderly placed the portrait again on the dressing table.

The moments, unheeded, had passed swiftly by. She had, unconsciously, lingered long with her thoughts. And removing hat and gloves, she bathed her tear stained face and went down stairs to her waiting mother. It semeed good to be at home. She would rather be there than at any place in the world. She was indeed grateful for a sweet home and loving parents. Did Merle Maxwell value these less because of her deep, unchanging love for Derris Leroy? No, indeed. But throbbing within every snow-white breast is a tender heartful of love for her mate. And when that love is blighted one never soars quite so high again.

Felecia Langford hurriedly washed and put away her "dinner" dishes. In her bustle and excitement she overturned a stew kettle of speckled peas, and dropped a dinner fork which was a sure indication that some one was coming, and a man, too. Had she dropped a dinner knife instead she would have declared that old Mrs. Pearson would come over with her knitting and stay the whole blessed evening. But since it was a fork—well, no telling, that long tongued preacher might turn in before she could get off to save her life. And she must see Amanda.

While sleeking her hair back and doing it in a knot high on her head, she called to William who was playing in the yard:

"Come here this minute, William, and wash your face. There he is, hard-headed just like his daddy. You may remain at home with your daddy for being disobedient, William. And you may remain too, Willard. Verbenie, you and Felecia tie on your bonnets and come along." And away they went to Miss Ogilvie's.

Scarcely had they entered the room and seated themselves ere Mrs. Langford began:

"Merle Maxwell returned home to-day."

"Returned home! Where has she been?" inquired Miss Ogilvie in surprise.

"Haven't you heard when all the town is commenting on Merle Maxwell going to Mayfield to see Derris Leroy. She returned home only this morning. For didn't I see Mose drive by in the pony carriage like all fury and her perched up on the back seat as bold as you please."

"Well, I'll say, Mrs. Langford, I hadn't heard the report. It surely was an audacious deed."

"That it was. And you hadn't heard the rumor. Why she was gone a whole week. It behooves girls to keep within the bounds of propriety if they care to be free of suspicion,' advised Mrs. Langford.

"Yes," assented Miss Ogilvie.

"You know, Amanda, I was so scared old Mrs. Pearson would come over with her knitting before I could get off. And I was afraid you hadn't heard about Merle Maxwell."

"I am glad that she, or nothing else prevented your coming, Mrs. Langford."

"Well, I am surprised that she didn't, for she is always going where she is not wanted. And a comical conversant she is with her continual 'heerd, knowed, seed, tother' and all the rest of her ungramatical phrases."

Their loud peals of laughter prevented Miss Ogilvie and Mrs. Langford from hearing the gentle knock on the door. The two were unaware of another's presence until little Felecia came running into the room:

"Some one has come, Mamma."

Miss Ogilvie arose, brushed the tears of mirth from her eyes and went to the door. And throwing her hands up apparently in great joy, exclaimed:

"Aunt Hester! if I can believe my eyes! Come in, Mrs. Pearson. I am so glad you have come. Mrs. Langford is here too." Mrs. Langford arose.

"I am so glad to see you, Aunt Hester. Amanda and I were speaking of you since I came and wondering why you had not returned our last calls. I was wishing only this morning that you would bring your knitting and spend the afternoon with me. I love so much to have you in my home, and waited some time in hopes of your coming before starting over here."

"Well, I ain't been feeling none too spry lately, Felecia," replied Mrs. Pearson, "is why I ain't been sooner. I had another spell of rheumatiz the tother day."

"I am so sorry, Mrs. Pearson. Rheumatism is so painful," sympathized Mrs. Langford.

"It surely is," added Miss Ogilvie.

"Verbenie, will you raise those window curtains so that Aunt Hester can see her knitting better?"

"You needn't go to so much trouble, Verbenie. I can see all right, Mandie."

"It is no trouble at all, Aunt Hester," assured Miss Ogilvie.

"Mrs. Pearson, have you heard the report on Merle Maxwell?" ventured Mrs. Langford.

"Why, no Felecia, what report?

"Law, I thought everybody knew about her going to Mayfield to see Derris Leroy. And you haven't heard it, when everybody is talking it? She stayed over a week. Returned just this morning."

"She waved to me this morning as she driv by my house," said Mrs. Pearson. "And Felecia, I have knowed Merle Maxwell since she was just a tiny baby, and I don't believe she went to Mayfield to see Mr. Leroy. I ain't heerd nothing agin her, and wouldn't believe it if I did. Somebody is always trying to slander the innocent. And I ain't going to believe no rumors agin Merle Maxwell. I wouldn't believe she had went to see Mr. Leroy if she had not come home for a month."

"Aunt Hester," soothed Miss Ogilvie, "this is only hearsay. Mrs. Langford merely heard this."

"O, of course we don't believe it, Mrs. Pearson," rejoined Mrs. Langford, "but it does appear suspicious from the fact that she went to Mayfield. Girls must remember that 'actions speak louder than words.' Of course we don't believe a word of it and would be the last to slander her."

"Felecia, Merle may have went to Mayfield but she has a girl friend there for I have heerd her say as much. She may have saw Mr. Leroy while there."

"Very likely," agreed Miss Ogilvie.

"But,' continued Mrs. Pearson, "if all would do as well as Merle Maxwell this old world would be more peaceable."

"Yes," agreed Miss Ogilvie. "But I wonder why she doesn't attend church more regularly?"

"She, no doubt, has a just cause, Mandie. Besides, it is not our privilege to judge. The Lord ain't turned that over to us yet. It is the Christian life lived on Sundays and every tother day of the week that counts, Mandie. And I believe Merle Maxwell lives a Christian life everyday, wherever she may be."

Miss Ogilvie, anxious to change the present topic, asked:

"How is Mr. Pearson, Aunt Hester?"

"Jest about the same as usual, Mandie. I left him and Brother Havis talking and slipped off over here, thinking it would do my rheumatiz a grain of good."

"Brother Havis certainly is a talker. In fact I think he talks too much," remarked Mrs. Langford.

Aunt Hester Pearson folded her knitting and put it within the large patch pocket on her gingham apron; and drew on gloves knited by her own hands; then rose tying her bonnet strings.

"Don't go so soon, Aunt Hester." implored Miss Ogilvie.

"Do spend the remainder of the afternoon with us, Mrs. Pearson," insisted Mrs. Langford.

"I must be agoin'. My light bread yeast will be riz and running over genst I get home."

"And you do bake such delicious bread," admitted Miss Ogilvie. I shall expect another visit real soon, Aunt Hester."

"And I, too, shall expect you soon," added Mrs. Langford.

"I will come when my rheumatiz gets better, Felecia. Both of you all come." Out at the door, down the steps and away Aunt

Hester Pearson went limping home.

Miss Ogilvie and Mrs. Langford resumed their seats. Scarcely had the door closed behind Mrs. Pearson ere Mrs. Langford began:

"I hope when she does call on me that she leaves her knitting and 'rheumatiz' at home."

"As well as her 'tother, aint, heerd, genst' and all the rest of her grammatical expressions, especially 'Mandie'," finished Miss Ogilvie.

After which much laughter and several more similar remarks ensued. Then Mrs. Langford rose to make her departure after a few preliminary remarks.

Not far had she to go ere Verbenie exclaimed:

"Oh, Mama, there comes Miss Merle!"

"Well, what of it?" snapped her mother in a tone that silenced little Verbenie. Presently little Felecia ventured:

"Mama, why don't you like Miss Merle?"

"I don't and that is sufficient, Felecia."

"I like her, mama, All the little girls do."

"That will do, Felecia. You and Verbenie run on home," commanded Mrs. Langford in a tone somewhat modulated. For just then she came face to face with Merle Maxwell, who, wishing to prove a friendly disposition. greeted her with a usual pleasant:

"How are you, Mrs. Langford?"

"I am simply bored to death, Merle, having spent the afternoon with Amanda Ogilvie. Her company is so tiresome. She has such peculiar old maidish ways. I wonder why she has never married?"

"I am sure that Miss Ogilvie remains unmarried from choice, Mrs. Langford. For I believe every girl can marry some one, if they choose to."

"O, of course someone, admitted" Mrs.

I was only out for a little stroll and really did not intend to venture so far."

"You are quite a long ways from home and it is growing late too."

"Oh, I'll be home ere the sun sheds its last ray of light," Merle called back over her shoulder as she started briskly homeward.

"Mama," said Verbenie, "isn't Miss Maxwell pretty?"

"Verbenie, If I hear you repeat her name again to-day I shall punish you."

"Why, Mama?" interrogated little Felecia.

"There! Take that and ask no more questions," scolded Mrs. Langford, as she slapped her youngest, leaving the print of her hand on the innocent child's cheek. However, children will be children. Soon the tears were dried and little Felecia's troubles were evidently forgotten. For just then the trio turned in at the Langford home and little Felecia again ventured:

"Mama, everybody loves Miss Merle but

you don't—" She was prevented from finishing the sentence by another blow on the cheek which sent her crying into the house, followed by Verbenie and her mother.

With much bustling, Mrs. Langford set about her evening chores.

"Here, Verbenie, take this bucket and go out to the chicken house and bring in the eggs. And don't you dare come in with one broken. Felecia, you carry in the kindling while I set supper. And going to the larder Mrs. Langford threw her hands up in exasperation. For not a speckled pea was left in the bowl! Not even a crumb of pastry to be seen on the pie plate! And great horrors, in her pitcher of richest cream was a spotted frog churning and splashing cream in every direction with his four useful feet. Indignation, wrath, rage, fury and anger, all these do not express Mrs. Langford's fit of animated passion when she beheld the true state of events.

The climax came when Verbenie presented her mother with an eggless bucket.

"Verbenie, where are those eggs?"

"There are no eggs mama."

"Felecia, go to the milk shed and tell your daddy to bring William and Willard and come to me this instant," stormed Mrs. Langford.

"Those twins have always been the aggravation of my life. They are just their daddy over again. This is their revenge for being made to remain at home this afternoon. I'll teach them and their daddy, too, a lesson. Where was Adam Langford that he could not see after those twins?" Just then Mr. Langford and sons made their appearance.

"What is the row, Felecia?" meekly asked her better half in the doorway.

"Just take a view of this larder, Adam Langford, if you want to know what the row is. Nice boys you are raising. Were you blind and deaf that you couldn't see and hear?" She pointed out the empty dishes and the pitcher of cream with the frog splashing with all his might.

"Well, I declare, Felecia, I was reading the church paper and thought the boys were at play."

"A nice Christian husband you are, that I can't take an afternoon for calling on Amanda Ogilvie, who has neither father or mother. And whose sisters and brothers have homes and loved ones of their own, leaving her to a solitary life save for a couple of trifling servants."

"Miss Ogilvie prefers living alone, Felecia."

"Well, I shouldn't blame her if her nieces and nephews are as meddlesome as those twins." Then turning to the boys:

"Why are there no eggs to be found in the chicken house?" The boys exchanged glances, one waiting for the other to answer.

"Answer your mother, boys," commanded

their father. Willard, white with terror, looked first at his father then at his mother before replying:

"We took them to the store and traded them for jaw-breakers."

"Nice sons you are," commented their mother. "And a nice father you are, Adam Langford, that you can't see after your own boys once while I make a neighborly call. A grand deacon in the church you are."

"Just as grand a deacon as you are ad eaconess, Felecia," retorted her husband for once. Adam Langford was accustomed to similar outbreaks from his wife. However, he was only human nature and once his anger aroused, a violent disturbance might well be expected.

"To see you in church," continued Mrs Langford, "one would think that you were an angel husband and father."

"And to see you in church,Felecia, no one would think that you would harm, by words and deeds, one so innocent as Merle Maxwell."

"How dare you insult me, Adam Langford?" Mrs. Langford stormed.

"Ah! Felecia, if you think I know nothing of your plotting with Amanda Ogilvie, I am ready now to enlighten you with the fact that I am not so blind and deaf as you once supposed me to be."

There is no telling when or where the row would have ended, but just then Verbenie emerged from behind the window curtain whence she had retreated:

"Mama, Brother Havis is coming in." Mrs. Langford turned to the twins who had retreated to the remotest corner of the room: "I'll get you boys to-morrow. Adam will you please dispose of that pitcher of frogs and cream?" in quite a different tone. And after donning her Sabbath sanctimonious expression, went to the door to greet brother Havis.

"Papa," then ventured little Felecia, "don't you like Miss Merle?"

CHAPTER XII.

IDA Harwood's little stepbrother came running in with handfulls of green and orange colored circulars and thrust them into his stepsister's lap. Ida picked one up and smoothing the wrinkles out read:

"Wood Hill Home-talent Players
Coming to Mayfield To-Night
"VILLAGE FOLKS"
A Domestic Drama in
Four Acts
Mayfield High School Auditorium
To-Night
Proceeds to go to the Church
Admission 25 and 50c."

"Wood Hill," mused Ida. O, yes, she had gone there with her father several times when quite small. She remembered it to be a beautiful little country village. She used to enjoy driving in the free open air with her father before he brought the second Mrs. Harwood home. Those happy days were passed save for their sweet memory. Of course she knew none of the "players" but she would like to attend, both because they were coming from Wood Hill and it would be amusing, no doubt. The circular bespoke as much. Again she read the announcement. And the proceeds were to go to the church. She should go for that reason alone. Merle Maxwell would. But Fridays were Mr. Norris' busiest days and no doubt his work would keep him late. Would he ask her to go if his work permitted?"

"Ida, Ida," called a voice from the doorway. Vera Whitworth had entered unceremoniously, and perceiving the circulars piled up in Ida's lap laughed outright.

"Come in, Vera, I was just musing over these," signifying the circulars.

"It is concerning those that I stepped in. However, you seem to be well informed."

"Quite," acquiesced Ida.

"But what do you think of it?"

"What do I think of it? Let's go! I happen to know a few of the characters in the play—see?"

"O, of course you are really better informed than I after all those," said Ida again referring to the circulars.

"It does promise to break the monotony of the movies some doesn't it?"

"Listen, Ida, I must run home and make ready. You come by early. We must not fail to go."

"Good," exclaimed Ida, and Vera was out at the door.

"Mrs. Harwood," said Ida, kindly, as she descended from the room, "I am going out to spend an evening with Vera."

"Very well, Ida," replied Mrs. Harwood somewhat indifferently.

"Vera, who is the gentleman just quitting the stage?" asked Ida during the first act of the drama.

"O, I don't know. But I do know the one just entering. Look, Ida, isn't he handsome?"

"Yes," agreed Ida. But she was more favorably impressed with the other gentleman. Something peculiarly fascinating in his manner. Perhaps it was the large round eyes that were so impressive. She had always admired large eyes. But no one could ever take Gaston's place in her heart. Why think of him at all? Ah! if we could only see the things the future holds in store for us. Had Ida Harwood had a glimpse into her future her life might have been different.

The last act had been rendered and the program for the evening ended. Paul Henry forced his way through the dense crowd to the side of Vera Whitworth, and with him came Joe Murray. After formal introductions and a few preliminary remarks, the four walked out into the beautiful moonlight to the home of Vera Whitworth.

Ida asked Mr. Murray many questions concerning Wood Hill. He told her of the many improvements the past few years had wrought in the little village. The old mill had been replaced by a new and more modern one. A cotton gin had recently been erected. Besides these, the little place now boasted of two churches, a graded school, postoffice and stores. In glowing terms Joe Murray pictured to her his beautiful country home, with hundreds of acres of rich land leading up to the little village, the numerous groves of trees, the running springs of water, the broad acres of pasture with saddling horses, driving horses and work horses. All these and no one save he with his father and mother to share them. Of course he had nothing to do but assist his father in superintending the farm. He had so much sympathy for the poor boys who were forced to labor for a support. He possessed the air and graces of a nobleman and in an impressive way expressed a desire to spend many more evenings with her as he wished her good evening.

Joe Murray was highly elated with the present course of events. Quite fortunate for him to be numbered among the Wood Hill home talent players. Rather an honor he considered it. The proceeds might go to the church or sink to the bottom of the ocean so long as he was permitted to display his intellectual ability on the stage, thereby gaining public favor and popularity. He had asked Paul Henry the favor of an introduction to the round faced brunette and it had been granted. He would woo and win her. Thanks to the credit of the Shoenburn Tailoring Company for the snug, classy, pinch-back sport suit and corresponding accessories that now graced his handsome figure. For a diamond scarf pin glistening in his tie, he was indebted to an aunt who had married well.

One evening a few weeks later Mr. Harwood came in with a deep scrowl on his face and vigorously swinging his right arm, which signified that something had gone awry. He went through the evening meal scarcely uttering a sentence, only to reply kindly to Mrs' Harwood's questions. Whatever his mood Mr. Harwood's attitude toward his wife was ever kind and respectful. His meal finished he turned to his beautiful daughter:

"Ida, I wish to speak to you in the library, presently."

"All right, Father," and Ida immediatelv followed her father to the library.

Mr. Harwood motioned her to be seated, then began:

"Ida, who is the person you were driving with this afternoon?"

"Mr. Murray," replied Ida.

"Where is he from and how did you come to know him?"

"He drives over from Wood Hill, father. I met him the evening of the Wood Hill home-talent drama at the school auditorium. He was with Paul Henry, and you know, father, that the Henry's are a preposesing people."

"Yes, Ida, the Henry's are of respectable birth and deserving of praise. However, I am not favorably impressed with this Mr. Murray. I have seen him in town frequently, and his air is not at all commendable. And I request you to discourage his attention at once. Even Wood Hill does not regard him well. My child, you only know him as he appears, not as he really is. And more than this, Ida, I had presumed that you were betrothed to Mr. Norris."

"Not at all, father. I am sure Mr. Norris does not entertain a thought of me beyond that of a friend. Mr. Murray appears to be a gentleman. He ranks high in the social world and perhaps higher in financial concerns than does Mr. Norris. I think of Mr. Murray only as a friend. However, I shall not discourage his attention, father, until I am convinced of his vices."

This bold assertion from the lips of his own child did not excite Mr. Harwood's anger But with eyes filling with unshed tears, and a slight quiver in his voice, said:

"Ida, my child, as your sweet mother pressed her dying pillow, I promised her with the help of the Supreme One to protect and shield our child from the lurking perils and dangers of life. And to teach her the way of a Christian life. The latter promise I have not kept More and more each day it haunts my memory. For more each day you are growing in her likeness. You have been the image of your dear mother from infancy. And since you have grown to young womanhood it seems, sometimes, that she has come back to earth again to remind me of my promises to her. The few brief years spent with her were halcyon days for me. And my greatest desire is to see you happy as we two were. Riches, Ida, do not always bespeak happiness. Pure love is happiness. And money provides comforts and pleasures. I trust, my child, that you will never have cause to regret your decision on this evening." And Mr. Harwood quitted the room more dejected than he had entered.

Ida Harwood was, indeed, the likeness of her departed mother save for her quick passionate disposition which she inherited from father. As the door closed behind her father, she burst into tears—bitter, remorseful tears.

Oh! why was she left motherless? Had it been her dear mother imparting advice to her she would have disclosed the fact that Mr. Norris was her only true love, and her lost hope of claiming him as her own. Ah! she was destined by fate to attempt to crush her love by accepting the attentions of one so unworthy of her. Her thoughts went back to another time when she had sat in the same room and in the same chair while Merle Maxwell directed her to the right way of life. Ah! could she brave the cruel realities of a cold, unfriendly world and remain true to her Savior and loyal to her church. Merle Maxwell had endured persecutions from so-called Christians—but she had never loved in vain. Did Ida Harwood guess aright? For Ida, to think was to act. Haste was her one besetting weakness.

She drew up to the writing desk and wrote:

"My dearest Merle:—Girl, I am sitting in the library this evening. And my mind goes to you and the never-to-be-forgotten hours that you and I spent together here on another evening. So many things have happened since that sweet time. Gaston and I are the same congenial friends. He doesn't call quite so often, however, he shall have cause to repent his indifference. For Merle, I have recently met one, Joe Murray, with the most fascinating, bewitching eyes! In fact, I feel myself slipping into a love drama in which he is the leading character. Of course you know how quickly I come to conclusions, and it may all blow over as serenely as the wind does daily. Merle, I can never repay you for your interest in my welfare and the dear encouraging words. I have always esteemed your friendship highly, but I never fully appreciated you until that memorable night. You spoke the very words that my heart had been longing to hear for so long. Oh, had I your sweet, placid disposition! Only this evening father requested me to discourage Joe Murray's attentions. I am sure father means well but no one understands my heart. Not even he—well—the outcome of all this we shall perceive.

"Mr. Leroy's sweet mother is in a state of declining health. Eloise Parker is often at Oak Lawn these days, probably to console Mrs. Worthington, or, to captivate Mr. Leroy, perhaps both. However, if she should succeed in the latter she would surpass the efforts of numbers of others of the fair sex. To me, life is a dreary march. Merle, I would willingly sacrifice my own life's happiness for your own sake. Such a friend to me as you are. Lovingly,

IDA HARWOOD."

Yes, Ida thought as she folded and addressed the message to Merle Maxwell that she would sacrifice her love and happiness for her dear friend. And for his sake too—for Gaston's sake. That Merle Maxwell was his choice she knew. And she should be contented to know that these two, so dear to her, were happy. Since early girlhood days she had cared for Norris. But Ida Harwood possessed a proud, independent nature as well as beauty. And the two should never guess that her heart was being crushed by the cold indifference of Gaston Norris. Even he should never know. We all must part with the dear ones in death and perhaps in life.

On the wall in her room was hanging the portrait of her mother. Long and tenderly she gazed intently upon it. "Ah, to me, mother is but a sad, sweet memory, while to many others a living joy! O, mother, dear, the hope of one day being with you is recompense for every disappointment in this life. Would that I were with you!" And in her dreams that night she was with her mother!

Some evenings later, Joe Murray, bedecked in his Sunday best, the diamond scarf pin glistening in his silk shirt bosom, and, with the dignity of an earl, was ushered into the Harwood east parlor, into the presence of Ida Harwood. Charming indeed was this beautiful flower in young womanhood. The folds of her pink satin evening gown graced her well developed but not too stout figure. A necklace of tinted pearls adorned her full neck. A jeweled bar pin of her mother's which she always wore completed her attire. She was fit to grace the throne of a queen. To some beauty is a blessing; to others a curse.

Joe Murray crossed the room and seated himself by Ida's side. And with a look of affectionate admiration, proclaimed:

"Ida, I love you, and would sacrifice my life for your happiness. Your very image is continually before me. Will you go with me?

We can build a beautiful home and live a happy life in luxury and enjoyment. I love you as I can no other. Ida, I am bearing the truth to you. Oh, let us be sweethearts! Let us be husband and wife and live in each others love, for I love you better than you know. Will you?"

"I cannot. Mr. Murray, I do not expect much happiness in this life."

"And why can you not accept me, Ida?" pleaded Joe Murray.

"First, I do not love you, and—"

"What is it, Ida?"

"My father objects, Joe."

"Your father ojects to me, Ida! If all the world scorned you, it would not lessen my love for you. Ida, will you not reconsider? I have spent wakeful hours thinking of you and the happiness our future holds for us if you will but go with me. You have a beautiful home, but I can offer one even better. And more, I offer a heart full of love. Ah, think of the sad, lonely hours that must come to my weary heart when I am miles away. For Ida, if you refuse to be queen of my home, I cannot remain at Wood Hill longer." Never more ardently or romantically did a lover plead, with tears—sentimental tears—coursing their way down his cheeks and on his silk shirt bosom, he kneeled before her. And with hands pressed to his heart, "Oh, Ida, that I could open my heart for you to view the love it contains for you! Will you not reconsider? Even if you do not love me now. will you not try one sweet day to return my love? Will you, Ida?"

Ida was all but won, partly through sympathy. For though Ida Harwood possessed a quick, passionate temper, within her bosom beat a tender heart. The picture of a beautiful country home at Wood Hill—the kind Joe Murray had pictured—sounded so romantic. Ah! dear reader, romance has led many a poor soul a cat's life. Joe Murray looked into her eyes, pleadingly, while he waited for her to answer. At length she said:

"Joe, I do not love you now. I must have time to think."

"Oh, Ida, how long must I wait? When may I come for my answer?"

"A week from this evening, Joe?"

"And this week will be months to me. O, my dear friend, reconsider, that you and I may not have cause to regret after time has made it impossible to change. Do not let your father's objection mar our happiness. I am bound to my people with bonds of love, just as you are to yours. But I would break even them for you. Our happiness is at stake. Let no one come between us. If your people object to me, let my love for you atone for that. In time they will come to know and trust me. In the meantime I am willing to endure persecution for your dear sake. In me you have a friend who will never forsake you. Oh, how my heart longs and yearns for you!"

"Joe, my father is all I have who is really interested in my welfare."

"Ida, do not say this. I would sacrifice my wealth, my life,for you. Just one week and I shall come for my answer. And I trust dear Ida, it will be in the affirmative."

"I will consider your words and regard them well, Joe." And he held her hand affectionly for a moment as he bade her good evening.

Ah! one hour in Gaston Norris' presence brought more happiness to her than a lifetime with Joe Murray, mused Ida, when left alone with her thoughts. And never would she go with him so long as there was a hope., of winning Norris. When that last hope was gone—well, Joe Murray with his untold wealth did seem better than life long loneliness. Besides, he was "pure dee swell," and conversed so fluently. His looks, too, were passable. In her heart she loved Gaston Norris. But should he not return that love, he should never know that Joe Murray was second choice. Well, she would see.

CHAPTER XIII.

MERLE Maxwell rose, tied on her straw sombrero, for the sun was shining forcibly; picked up the book she had been reading and strolled down the path to a pond of fresh, running water, some quarter of a mile's distance from her home. And seating herself comfortably under the shade of a magnificent magnolia, resumed her reading. Not long did she read, however, for soon she was disturbed by approaching footsteps and the prattling of childish voices. Pitapat, pitapat, came the little footsteps, while more and more distinct sounded the childish voices.

Presently, Verbenie and little Felecia Langford wound their way around the trees and stood before Merle.

"Miss Merle. will you please give us a drink from the spring?" asked Verbenie, digging her bare toe into the ground. Then adding, "mama wouldn't like for us to go near the spring."

"Of course," responded Merle as she took the proffered cup.

"But where is your mother?'

"Oh, she is at home, Miss Merle. You know Miss Amanda is spending the day there, and mama never wants us about when Miss Amanda comes. She sent us out into the yard to play. And we thought it would be such fun to run over here and play until she goes home."

"Now," suggested Merle after she had given each a cool, refreshing drink of pure, spring water, "don't you think you had better run home and play in the yard as your mother bade you?"

"Miss Merle, mama don't care. She never

cares where we go when Miss Amanda comes."

"Then suppose we sit down and rest for awhile," again suggested Merle, as she resumed her former seat under the tree.

Felecia seated herself by Merle's side and looking straight into her kind, sweet face, asked:

"Miss Merle, do you like mama and Miss Amanda?"

"Yes, Felecia, I try to love everyone."

"Even old Hester Pearson?"

"Yes, I love Aunt Hester very much. But if I were you I should call her 'Aunt Hester Pearson,' Felecia."

"Mama calls her that. She says she is awful. But I am going to call her 'Aunt Hester' like you, Miss Merle."

"Felecia," said Merle, "Aunt Hester is a sweet, Christian character and worthy of respect."

"Miss Merle are all the folks mama and

Miss Amanda talk about Christians?"

"I don't know, I am sure, Felecia."

"But little Felecia Langford was not one to be silenced once she had begun, and continued, "Aunt Hester is a Christian and you are. And Miss Merle, mama and Miss Amanda say just lots of bad things about you."

"I am sorry Felecia."

"I feel so sorry for you, Miss Merle," sympathized Felecia, "and papa does too, sometimes."

"He does?"

"Yes, he did one time when we had been to Miss Amanda's. And Aunt Hester was there too. And when we came home mama said lots of bad things about you. Papa and mama were quarreling about you when Brother Havis came, then they quit. Papa said that you was innocent and that mama and Miss Amanda was plottin' about you. But me and Verbenie didn't know what plottin' meant. Do you know, Miss Merle?"

"Yes, but let us suppose it is all right, Felecia."

"Papa said it wasn't all right, Miss Merle. But Mama and Miss Amanda talks bad about you all the time. Verbenie says that is why they don't want us around 'cause we like you. But mama don't want us to. Mama don't want you to be organist, either," continued Felecia who had, evidently, inherited her mother's free flow of speech.

"I am sure some one else would be better, Felecia."

"Mama says it is for the good of the church for you not to be organist, and that you can't play, anyway. But papa thinks mama wants to play."

"Felecia, I am so sorry if I am a stumbling block in or out of the church. I should much rather your mama would play and—"

What was that? A scream and a splash of water!

While little Felecia had been entertaining "Miss Merle," Verbenie had ventured too near the spring. She was sinking for the third time into water five feet in depth when Merle Maxwell seized her and pulled her to the shore. After much shaking and rubbing, Verbenie regained her natural breathing. With her own dainty handkerchief Merle Maxwell wiped the water from her face. Then, disrobing herself of a petticoat, she wrapped her in it as best she could and bade her and Felecia to go home as quickly as possible.

Again Merle seated herself, for the excitement, together with the exertion, in rescuing the drowning child, had left her pale and trembling. Her strength was all but exhausted. Verbenie was a very stout child.

"I must again beg pardon for intrusion, Miss Merle," came the words from the lips of

Mr. Topleitz as he came up with hat in hand. (It will be remembered that in the beginning of this story Mr. Topleitz was an intimate friend of Mr. Maxwell.)

"Not at all, Mr. Topleitz," came the startled reply from Merle.

"Why, Miss Merle, have I frightened you?" Just at that instant Mr. Topleitz noticed her unusual paleness.

"Oh, no, Mr. Topleitz, I—I am tired." Then she related to him Verbenie's misfortune.

"Child, that was too much for you. You have saved the child of the only enemy you have on earth. I met the scapegoats a few minutes gone and knew that they had been up to something."

"Mr. Topleitz, I would have exhausted my entire strength to have rescued her." Ah, more than that, Merle Maxwell would have sacrificed her life for another.

"You are right, my child. However, we all know that Felecia Langford would be the last to go to your assistance."

At the mention of Felecia Langford's name the truths, that little Felecia had recently imparted to her, flashed vividly across her memory."

"Mr. Topleitz, I wish to offer my resignation as church organist."

"And why, my child?"

"I—I do not feel strong enough to continue. Some one else, Mrs. Langford, perhaps, would be more competent. She is much stronger than I."

"Of course, child, if you do not feel able to continue we shouldn't impose on you. For you have been faithful and loyal to your church as well as patient and enduring. We can't hope to find one better qualified. But for your given reason alone the church will consider your resignation. Is this your sole cause?"

Merle had not expected to be interrogated in this way. And with eyes rivited on the pebbles that she was, unconsciously, toying with a nervous hand, stammered out the reply:

"Ye—yes."

Ah, do you think it was hard for Merle Maxwell to tell a falsehood? However, Mr. Topleitz was several years her senior and thought he understood the meaning of her affirmative answer.

"Miss Merle," said Mr. Topleitz, "I believe there are those whose thoughts are never elevated beyond injuring some innocent one. They pretend to be God's children seeking after his own heart. But I believe that they have never been baptized into 'the lake of pure love that never falters.' True Christians, Merle, have other missions in this life than criticising others. Their mission is quite a different one. If only the cruel, fault-finding words were turned into words of encouragement! A word of criticism "like a snowball, when once started, gathers as it goes." There are those who are never content until they are feasting on the apparent failure, both intellectually and spiritually, of one of their superiors. My dear child, don't let the unjust, heartless criticisms of so-called Christians debar you from your church work and your mission in life."

"My mission, Mr. Topleitz," said Merle, "is to live for God and others. But it seems that in the latter I have failed. My work in the church has not been worthy of praise and commendation."

"My child, we all know that your efforts have not been to obtain the applause of any. After all, it is not the work approved by man and the church, but by God that counts."

"Yes," acquiesced Merle, as she rose to go. "I must return home, Mr. Topleitz. Will you go?"

"Yes, I was just on my way there to spend a few hours with your father." The former conversation continued until they had reached the end of their short walk. And Mr. Topleitz was ushered into the presence of Uncle Tim. Do you wonder that Merle Maxwell decided on the quiet Christian life, doing the little deeds of love that her hands found daily to do, in preference to the active church work she had loved so dearly? She should not have made this decision because of a long-tongued woman, contend our preachers. Neither do I insist that she should have. Was Merle Maxwell more preternatural than we? Would you have endured more than she from the lips of Felecia Langford? Of course she should not have heeded Felecia Langford, neither Amanda Ogilvie, nor their inhuman criticisms. No more should she have permitted her love for Derris Leroy to weigh so heavily upon her mind. We should not permit these, but we do, or Merle Maxwell did. If we all did just the right thing this old world would be heaven. Ah, do you wonder that this gentle creature, Merle Maxwell, had grown tired of—of life itself?

Having excused herself from the presence of Mr. Topleitz and her father, she sought the quiet solitude of her room. There she dwelt long upon the words of little Felecia Lanford. Perhaps after all efforts her church work had not been efficient. But not one word of encouragement had she received. More than this, Sabbath after Sabbath Merle Maxwell had entered the little church and her work conscious that there were those, though few in number, who were eagerly searching for her mistakes. When we search for faults and errors we are sure to find them. Felecia Langford did. Enough to gloat over for days. She, Merle Maxwell, would resign all to Mrs. Langford and Miss Ogilvie. And in her kind-heartedness she trusted that they should never be humiliated and treated as she had been treated by them. Perhaps Mrs. Langford was right, that it was for the good of the church that she wished her to discontinue her active work. She would remain true to her Savior. And in her humble way she would do the little deeds of love that her hands found daily, A gentle knock sounded on the door to disturb her reverie.

"Come in, mother."

The door pushed softly open and the black kinky head of Aunt Texanna peered in.

"It's not your mother, Miss Merle. It's yo' ole black mammy what's come to remind yo' dat it's six o'clock and dinner is waitin' to be served."

"Thank you, Auntie, I had not noticed that it was dinner hour."

"I knowed yo' didn't, honey."

"Thank you, Auntie."

Merle followed Texanna to the dining room where Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell and Mr. Topleitz were seated at the dining table awaiting her.

"You can never guess the surprise in store for you, Miss Merle," greeted Mr. Topleitz, as she seated herself at the table.

"Oh, what can it be!" came the forced exclamation from the lips of Merle Maxwell.

"Your father," responded gentle Mrs. Maxwell, "and Mr. Topleitz, have planned a visit for you and me."

"How very kind of them. But whom and where are we to visit?"

"Our only sister and aunt at Camden, New Jersey. Just think of it, Merle, I havn't seen her for years and I have wanted so much to visit there."

"You and I go there alone, mother?" objected Merle.

"Of course not," reassured Mr. Maxwell. That has all been settled. Mr. Topleitz and I shall accompany you, returning within a week. He, too, has relatives at Camden."

"But the servants, father?"

"They shall have a holiday. Texanna is very much in need of rest; the others have been faithful and obedient."

"Yes," asserted Merle, and perceiving her every excuse defeated, asked:

"When are we to go?"

"One week from to-day," informed her father.

"And how long are we to remain, mother?"

"Until the roses are blooming again in your cheeks," laughingly suggested Mr. Topleitz.

"You are to remain until your mother and you have satisfactorily made your visit, child," assured Mr. Maxwell.

What could she do but go, once her parents had made the decision? After all, what mattered where her weary days were spent? That this had all been planned mainly on her own account she doubted not, and appreciated the love and kind intentions of her parents and Mr. Topleitz. But, oh, if she could only think of a reason or excuse for declining.

But there was none and go she must.

The following days were spent in making preparations. In making ready for a long journey there are many things to do and consider, especially when the entire household is to have a holiday. Mr. Topleitz had looked volumes when Mrs. Maxwell insisted that they have a whole week for preparations. As for him he could be ready on the morrow. Of all the Maxwell household none were so highly elated over the promised holiday as were Madie Bryant and Mose Anderson. While others were planning, they, too, were planning.

Merle had ordered the pony carriage and was well on her way to Aunt Hester Pearson's who had had a recent attack of "rheumatiz." On the spacious seat beside her were beautiful bouquets of selected flowers. In her hands she carried a bowl of blackberry jam, a favorite of Aunt Hester's.

She observed the unusual restlessness and apparent uneasiness of Mose. His huge feet were shifted first to the right and then to the left. They were crossed and uncrossed not less than a dozen times. For the hundredth time his lips parted as if in an effort to speak And for the hundredth time the words choked in his throat. At length, he made a more determined effort and turning abruptly in his seat, stammered forth:

"Miss—Miss Merle, ain't I've tried to be a 'bedient servant?"

"Of course you have, Mose. You have not only tried but you have been a very faithful and obedient servant. Has anybody dared to say that you have not been?"

"N'om." The ice broken he continued with more ease, "Miss Merle, I likes yo' and yo' ma and pa." Horrors! Was he actually going to propose then and there?

"I am so glad that you like me, Mose. I wish that everyone did. Mother and father deserve and appreciate the good will of all."

Mose, feeling more and more composed, ventured nearer the thought dearest to him just now.

"Miss Merle, will yo' ax yo' ma to let Madie look after de chickens, turkeys and poultry, while yo' all is gone to dat place in Jersey? Marster Maxwell done gi'e me liberty to stay right hyeh and do de chores and tend to dese two black beauties jest like I've always done."

"Of course I will intercede for you, Mose."

"Mam?"

"I said, 'of course I would ask mother to give Madie permission to remain.' We thought she would be delighted with the permission of a holiday."

"She sho is." Then nervously winding the lines around his hand, "We'se gwine to marry, Miss Merle."

"You are!" exclaimed Merle with a suppressed smile on her face as she lighted in front of Aunt Hester's door.

"You may wait, Mose," she called over her shoulders as she ran up the steps.

Aunt Hester Pearson's "rheumatiz" was indeed worse, but, oh, how her face lighted up with joy when she beheld the beautiful flowers and bowl of jam in Merle's hands. Tears of love mingled with words of appreciation as the saintly old soul accepted the gifts and kind, cheerful words of comfort and consolation. She hobbled to the door and watched Merle, as she decended to her waiting carriage, with a "God bless you. child, and make you as happy as you have made others."

Merle ordered Mose to drive back through the village. And when she dismissed him at her own gate she held up a parcel, "Mose, this is your wedding present."

"I ain't done married yit, Miss Merle."

"Oh, of course not, but this is to wear on your wedding day."

"Yes'um, I sho' will wear it, Miss Merle." Not until Mose was in his own, small cabin, that Madie was soon to share with him, did he open the parcel. The most beautiful silk tie that eyes ever beheld, he thought, "with red roses all 'broidered in it. Wouldn't Madie be proud of him!"

Straight to her room Merle went. And from a collection of discarded but beautiful costumes selected a dark, red velvet. Then, decidedly, replaced it. She had worn that on the evening of her betrothal to Derris Leroy It brought forth sweet, bitter memories. She would never, never part with it. Another selection and she ran down to the kitchen where Madie was assisting Aunt Texanna in baking.

She presented the dress to her, suggesting that she remodel it by lengthening the waist belt and also the skirt. Madie's eyes were rolled in heavenly ecstacy.

"Thank you, Miss Merle. I'll weah this on special 'casions." How it gladdened Merle Maxwell to know others were happy, even these two. Just a few explanatory words with her mother and it was agreed that Madie remain there and look after the chickens, turkeys, and poultry."

The day for the Maxwell's departure dawned. Aunt Texanna was, apparently, the sole unhappy occupant of the household. Everything was in readiness. The trunks had been sent to the station. Mose, with "Happy" as his middle name, waited at the front to drive them to the station. Merle was last to quit the house. And when she started down the gravel walk, retreated her steps to Aunt Texanna, who was standing in the doorway watching her "baby."

"I would much rather stay, Auntie."

"Go long honey, it may help yo.'" But the worthy old servant doubtfully shook her kinky head.

On that self same day, in a little cabin church not far from the village of Popularville, a wedding was solemnized.

CHAPTER XIV.

IDA Harwood stood before her mirror doing her dark hair in beautiful coils on a well shaped head. One week had flitted by since the proposal of Joe Murray, and this evening he was coming for her answer. Perhaps he would bring the solitaire to place upon her betrothal finger. She truly hoped not for her answer would be decidedly in the negative. A something in her inner self prompted this decision. That Gaston Norris was slipping out of her life—and heart, she was conscious. Yet, the promise of his true, loyal friendship was dearer to her than the love of all the Joe Murrays. In her mind she framed the picture of herself as Joe Murrays “queen” with her heart daily longing and yearning for one kind, loving word from another. Even the golden wealth of the Murrays could not compensate her for this. That her love for Gaston Norris was more endearing than he had dreamed of she doubted not. Yet, there was hope if she but patiently waited. Perhaps, after all, her father was right. Her face flushed crimson as she felt shame for hasty, decisive reply which she had greeted her father a few evenings previous.

She hurriedly dashed the tears from her eyes with the delicately perfumed handkerchief lying on her dresser table as her stepmother entered unceremonously.

"Ida, that Joe Murray is waiting in the east parlor."

"Send word that I shall be down presently. Thank you, Mrs. Harwood." Without a word Mrs. Harwood made her exit through the door. And in no pleasant tone sent the message down.

Returning to the room she sent the door to with an unfriendly bang. Then turning upon Ida a look of disgust and repugnance, blared forth:

"Ida, I wonder that you tolerate the attentions of this man against your father's and my wishes. Isn't it enough that we clothe and feed and shelter you without you bringing this worthless being into the home and—and into the family?" At this unjust reproof and accusation, Ida Harwood's whole being filled with rebellious resentment, crushing out the tender feeling that had a moment before filled her heart.

"Mrs. Harwood,I have brought no one into the family. Neither have I brought disgrace upon you or yours. Father is quite capable of supporting me. At least I shall not call for the disbursement of your individual possessions. Neither is Mr. Murray as worthless as you have concluded. Your and father's possessions combined do not compare with those of the Murrays."

"So says Joe Murray," retorted Mrs. Harwood.

"And Joe Murray's assertions are as true as your's,Mrs. Harwood."

"Very probable" sneered her stepmother, "however public sentiment is not in his favor."

"Neither did public sentiment favor my father's second marriage."

"How dare you speak thus, Ida Harwood! I shall speak to your father of this."

"Just as you dared to intrude into my privacy, Mrs. Harwood," replied Ida as she brushed past her stepmother and went down into the presence of Joe Murray.

He greeted her with a graceful bow and much ado. The king upon his throne could not have been more eloquent in speech or manner. Scarcely were their greetings over ere Joe Murray, for the second time, pleaded his cause.

"Come be my wife and life partner," he pleaded. "Oh, do not decline my offer and send me away to face a frowning world alone! Trust your future happiness to me, one whom you may depend upon for every wish. Only go with me and I will win your love by granting every wish a heart could desire." With arms outstretched he pleaded on. Such romantic words never fell from human lips. "Oh, will you not come with me and be my village queen?" With lips drawn closely together, she answered:

"I will."

The ashen hue of Ida Harwood's face was mistaken for solemnity of the occasion. And Joe Murray seized both her hands in his.

"When?" he eagerly asked.

"At once, Joe."

"I did not bring the ring this evening, Ida.

I thought perhaps best not to lavish gifts upon you before our marriage, for fear that some might conclude that I was buying your love with costly presents. Only be mine and you may have the pleasure of selecting as many diamonds and tinted pearls as you choose."

Ida Harwood shuddered, whether at the doubt that flitted across her memory or the touch of his hand on hers, I know not. Or. perhaps, it was because of the step she was about to take. Ah! she wanted no time for reflection, and answered firmly:

"I would rather not wait for the ring, Joe. It is best as you say. Besides, I prefer making my own selections," she added with a forced smile and, perhaps, a tone somewhat more befitting to the time and occasion.

"You are a precious jewel, Ida, my own. My carriage and ponies are waiting. Shall we go now?"

"Yes, I am quite ready."

Ah! Ida Harwood had months of leisure in which to repent of this hasty step! Joe Murray could have screamed with exultant joy over his victory. Once the ceremony said, the vows of fidelity made to him and God, what mattered then?

"Ida Harwood eloped with Joe Murray of Wood Hill!" was the startled exclamation from the lips of all Mayfield. If there was one more surprised than all others it was Gaston Norris. How he missed her congenial friendship he had so long shared. That she should be swept away from him and Mayfield in this manner was inconceivable to him. Why, he had sought her counsel in every petty vexation!

A spirit of gloom seemed to overspread the most part of Mayfield, especially in the Harwood home. Not a word had Mr. Harwood for any. His meals were forced down in silence. He was often seen coming up the street or walking in his own yard with his right shoulder drooping several degrees below its normal position and with head bent dejectedly. As for Mrs. Harwood—well, Ida was out of her way. One less for husband to support. She had gone against their wishes and she must need endure the consequences. Joe Murray might be good or he might be bad or he might be neither; however, her responsibilities of Ida were ended. And it did take so much for the support of girls. She was glad that both hers were boys. She did hope Ida's elopement would not affect her, Mrs. Harwood, in the social circle. Truly, this was her regret. That Mrs. Harwood had spoken the harsh words that brought about Ida's decision was incomprehensible to Mayfield. Had Mr. Harwood the slightest suspicion of his child's ill treatment in her home, things would have taken on a serious aspect. For though it was his privilege to love and reverence his wife, it was also his duty to shield and protect his child.

The Worthington home was clothed in silence. The inmates were lost in slumber save Derris Leroy, who stepped back from his table and gazed upon his work critically. At last it was completed and so far a success save for the perfection of one small revolving wheel. He must needs consult a civil engineer. "Mr. Norris, perhaps, was more competent than the others," he determined after several minutes of careful deliberation.

The late hours of toil and study were telling on his young, boyish face. Tiny crow's feet were visible about the eyes. The lines around his mouth, too, were deepening. And the expression on his handsome face was a bit serious for one of his age. Time after time he had promised himself much sleep and relaxation of the mind as soon as his invention should be completed. But tonight he was alive with hope and expectation. It was almost impossible for him to compose himself to wait for the dawning of another day to consult a civil engineer. Women are not the only creatures in the world who become excited in a moment of uncertainty which is mingled with desirous anticipations.

After consulting with his attorneys and Mr. Norris it was deemed necessary that Leroy should go at once to Camden, New Jersey, for an interview with the factory concerning the deficient wheel. "An impossibility,' he declared, "for him to go just at this time. Responsibilities at the office and the declining health of his mother would not permit his leave at this particular time." He insisted upon Mr. Norris going in his stead. At the same time volunteering to defray all expenses and, also,an ample recompense for consumed time and trouble. It was agreed that Mr. Norris start for Camden, New Jersey, the following morning.

Accordingly he reached the end of his predetermined journey late in the afternoon of the third day. Alighting from the car and ordering his bagage to respectable but moderate rooms—for he anticipated several days sojourn in the city—he decided to view a portien of the city before going to his evening meal. He stood on Trenton street admiring the handsome tonneau passing through the street. It slowed down and came to a standstill on the opposite side. The figure alighting resembled some one he had seen. The carriage of person and the slight slender form altogether looked familiar. He turned his footsteps in that direction. "Miss Maxwell! Could it be possible? She had come to this place without his being the wiser—but Ida had been absent several days from Mayfield?"

Merle Maxwell was equally surprised when he joined her. Almost the first expression after the formal greeting was:

"How are all my friends in Mayfield? How is Ida?"

"And you havn't heard, Miss Maxwell, of

Ida's recent elopment?"

"Elopement! No!"

"Quite true. I see you are as greatly surprised as was Mayfield, myself included."

"Two surprises in a single afternoon, Mr. Norris, might prove pernicious to the heart. But who is the other leading character in this romantic incident?"

"One, Joe Murray, of Wood Hill," informed Mr. Norris.

"Had it been you instead of this Mr. Murray I should not have wondered.' laughingly suggested Merle."

"Ida and I were never more to each other than congenial friends, Miss Maxwell."

"I sincerely trust that Ida may ever be happy and contented. A more desirable friend I never possessed," commented Merle a bit regretfully.

"You speak my sentiments correctly, Miss Maxwell."

"Vera Whitworth," quiried Merle, "how is she?"

"Oh, she too, is grieved over the loss of Ida. Her father, Dr. Whitworth, is summoned often to the Worthington home. Mrs. Worthington and Mr. Leroy's mother is growing more feeble each day."

"I am sorry indeed to learn of this intelligence, Mr. Norris." Taking advantage of the opportunity Mr. Norris remarked:

"Rumor speaks favorably of Miss Eloise Parker and Mr. Leroy."

"I have not had the pleasure of Miss Parker's acquaintance," Merle replied confusedly. Not wishing to continue the present topic of conversation she suggested that they return to the toneau that he might meet her mother and Aunt. Her mother Mr. Norris was sure he would have recognized anywhere because of the striking resemblance of Merle. Not until he had received a cordial invitation from Mrs. Maxwell and her sister to call in their home did he quit their enjoyable presence.

In her room sat gentle Mrs. Leroy with her head pillowed against the soft cushioned morocco chair, a sweet smile playing over her thin, pale face. The unusual brightness of her kind eyes bespoke a meaning all too plainly. Madam Nurse sat by, frequently moistening the dry, parched lips with a preparation prescribed by Dr. Whitworth. He again entered the room and taking her thin, wasted hand in his held it for a moment while he counted the pulse vibrations. Then, turning, walked into an adjoining room.

Soon he was followed by the quick steps of Derris Leroy:

"Dr. Whitworth, is there no hope?"

Dr. Whitworth moved uneasily.

"I am seeking the unvarnished truth, Dr. Whitworth" insisted Leroy.

"My dear Mr. Leroy, there is no further hope for her in this life. It is only a matter of a few hours." Observing Leroy's bowed head and ashen face Dr. Whitworth continued:

"It pains me to speak these words, however, I cannot, conscientiously, withhold the solicited truth and remain true to my profession."

Derris Leroy raised his head and in a steady voice asked: "A change of climate and surroundings, Dr. Whitworth?"

"That would only tend to hasten the end. My dear Mr. Leroy, all that human skill can do has been done; we cannot stay the hand of God. Sweet mothers, like beautiful flowers, cannot be with us always. Everything earthly must end, so do our loved ones depart this life for a better one, we hope. For your mother, Leroy, it will only be a happy awakening in a heavenly home. Death is not so much a grim monster to those who dare to live faithfully and sincerely the life set before them. Each day of our life in this world we are making preparations for death—sure to come to all in some way and at some time. This is hard to endure, yet, we must look beyond the grave. In parting with loved ones in this world we go to meet those who are waiting with outstretched arms to greet us. Your mother would fain remain longer with loved ones here but it is not God's way and His way is best. Besides this, think of her dear companion and babies who have long waited her. You, Derris, yet have youth and it is yours to successfully live, as nearly as possible, the pure consecrated life taught you from infancy. God has been more merciful to us than we deserve, and may His blessings to you continue, dear boy."

Mr. Leroy stood listening with bowed head until Dr. Whitworth had finished, then he said, dejectedly:

"Dr. Whitworth, go break this sad news to Annibel. It cannot be more grievous to her than to me. She has a worthy companion to share her every trial—I have no one. Mother is my all in this life."

As Dr. Whitworth softly closed the door behind him Derris Leroy sank into a chair and buried his head in his hands, his strong, manly form shaking convulsively. For several moments he sat thus, then rose, composed himself and went into his mother. He would spend the few remaining hours with her with or without the approval of Madam Nurse. Mrs. Worthington had preceded him a few moments, attended by her husband and Eloise Parker.

Mrs. Leroy turned her head and scanned the room as if in search of some one. Then turned her gaze upon her only daughter:

"Annibell, where are Freddie and Idell?"

Mrs. Worthington turned to Dr. Whitworth who nodded approval. And the children were brought in.

"Are we all here?" faintly asked Mrs. Leroy.

"Yes, mother," came from the lips of her children.

"The babies, Annibell—I want to kiss the babies."

Mr. Worthington lifted the children upon her chair arm. She took the chubby little hands in her feeble ones.

"God bless you, children, and may you grow to worthy womanhood and manhood. Good-by darlings" and she kissed them fondly.

"Where you going, grandmudder," asked little Freddie with eyes opened wide in wonder.

"I am going to my sweet children and your grandfather, Freddie."

"I want to go with grandmother," sobbed little Idell. And the children were led out into the nursery.

Lacking in strength Mrs. Leroy subsided into a rest for only a few moments. Then, observing the tear-stained faces before her, summoned her utmost strength to speak'

"Children, do not weep for me. I am not

alone. The dear Jesus that has watched o'er me each day of my life and has borne every sorrow and heartache is with me now. Surely this is not death. I would not have you grieve for me, children. Be happy and strive to meet me in heaven." Then addressing Mr. Worthington, continued:

"Frederick, help Annibel to teach the babies the way to our Savior."

"I will, mother."

She stopped a moment for her strength was going. Then turning her eyes upon her son, who was by her side, went on. "Derris, my dear son, continue to follow in your dear father's footsteps whom you so much resemble. Be honest and upright in everything, following the teachings of our Savior. I would love to stay with you yet awhile, but I hear my Savior calling and loved ones are beckoning me home."

She sank back on her pillowed chair. "I am so tired." Dr. Whitworth turned to Madam Nurse:

"Lay her on the bed. She will have no more paroxysms of coughing."

"But Leroy was quicker than Madam Nurse. He gathered her tenderly in his arms and bore her to the bed, and arranging her pillows comfortaby. While Mrs. Worthington with her own hands moistened the dry lips Then the two knelt by her side, Mrs. Worthington clinging to her, convulsively. Leroy, with his own pocket handkerchief, wiped the cold drops of perspiration from her brow. Just a slight stir. "Oh, children, everyone is so happy—up yonder! I see your father, oh, husband, my own! Jesus — is — calling—me—home." A soul went up to meet its God.

Leroy placed a kiss upon his mother's brow and with bowed head walked from the room. A few moments later Mrs. Worthington was borne away between her husband and Eloise Parker. Though Annibel Worthington had a companion and children, it did not tend to lessen her grief for her dear departed mother, from whom she had scarcely been separated during her short life. Dr. Whitworth had done what he could and went out to serve others.

CHAPTER XV.

SUMMER was waning and Autumn was close at hand. Mrs. Maxwell and her daughter's visit had lengthened into weeks. They had retired to their room for the evening, after a pleasant day's outing.

"Mother," said Merle, as she pillowed her head in her mother's lap, "don't you think our visit has been quite sufficient?"

Mrs. Maxwell stroked her child's beautiful, dark, brown hair and replied:

"Yes, I think our visit has been rather a lengthy and pleasant one. Though I am afraid your health has not improved much."

"Oh, I am much better, mother. I—I feel quite strong. And if you are ready, I prefer returning home at once," she suggested hopefully.

"Child, I have been ready to return home these last few weeks. We will wire your father to-morrow to come and within a week we shall be at home again."

"Oh, good!" exclaimed Merle." But can we not return alone at once?"

"Your father, Merle, would be much displeased if we should attempt the journey alone. He insisted that we wire him when our visit was over, you remember?"

"You are right, mother."

Several moments of silence ensued to be broken by Merle.

"Mother," she ventured, "I am to be married ere many moons."

"To whom, my dear."

"To whom! Why to Mr. Norris, mother."

Mrs. Maxwell had wondered many times concerning Derris Leroy and her child. But, remembering her own girlhood days and reservedness in things of this nature, had sought no explanation from her child.

"Mr. Norris is indeed a worthy young man, Merle. And do you love him more than all others? You know that true love is the base of all happiness.,'

"Mother, Mr. Norris is worthy of the highest praise and deserving of all happiness attainable."

Her mother's question she evaded. Mrs. Maxwell took her child in her arms and lavished a dozen kisses upon her fair face.

"May your future life be filled with happiness and rich blessings, my baby," she said with tears glistening in her eyes—whether at the gladness in her own heart for her child's happiness, or the thought of losing her to another, I know not.

"When is your wedding to be?" she asked as soon as she was able to compose herself.

"In the beautiful springtime, mother, early in May, perhaps."

"To me, springtime is the most beautiful season of the year," commented Mrs. Maxwell. We must hasten home and begin preparations at once," she continued. "But where are you to make your home—in Mayfield?"

"I—I suppose so, mother." A dark cloud flitted across her face. She had not thought how hard it would be to go there to live with another than Derris Leroy.

"Are you ill? asked Mrs. Maxwell.

"No, mother, I am tired. I shall retire."

She fondly bade her mother goodnight, lingering long, as if her heart bade her speak.

"What is it child?" her mother kindly asked.

"It will grieve me to leave you and father."

"We shall be, oh, so lonesome without you, but your father and I are willing to sacrifice our pleasure for your happiness. Besides, it is not so far to Mayfield and we can be with each other often."

"True, mother. And after all, our greatest pleasure are found in sacrificing our own happiness for others." These words Merle Maxwell spoke from the depths of her honest heart. There was for her no real happiness beyond this. And why not go with Gaston Norris if "her presence alone" afforded him happiness. She had told him that she could not return his love, but perhaps one day she would learn to care for him.

The following day a message was dispatched to Uncle Tim, and his arrival was expected daily. Meanwhile the Maxwell home was in a state of excitement. Every floor was being mopped and repolished. Every rug dusted and replaced by Madie, who was cheerfully assisted by her better half. Aunt Texannna was literally bubbling over with joy. She did wish "them kids" would quit their "foolin' Every window in the house was to be polished. "Every inch of dis hyeh yard is going to be raked," she mused, half aloud. "Them magnolium leaves had to be clared off, every one of 'em. And, law sakes, she had a bushel o' bakin' to do, for didn't Marser Maxwell tell her to prepare a feest for 'em? And hadn't he done went to fetch Missus and her baby home? Whut if they shuld come a day or two ahead o' time," she chuckled to herself.

In due time the work was completed and the "home coming day," as Aunt Texanna would have it, had dawned. The entire place was shining as bright as a new pin. Both Madie and her elated helpmate were bedecked in their wedding apparal. Mose and the ponies were in waiting an hour ere time to drive to the station. It was impossible to distintinguish who were the happier on that memorable day—the Maxwells or their servants. It seemed to Merle that she should never care to be away from home again. She had enjoyed and appreciated the kind hospitality of her aunt, but to her, home was the dearest place on earth. Ah! could she leave this sweet home for one she loved not? The most humble, insignificant home in the world to-day is more tolerable than the home wherein no true love exists.

The autumn months glided by uneventfully, so far as Popularville was concerned. The cold winter days came on in fierceness. The inhabitants of the little village had evidently subsided into winter quarters. Merle Maxwell and her mother were improving every moment in planning and making dainty handwork for the former's trousseau. Of lingerie garments there were to be a dozen of each. And dresses innumerable with corresponding accessories were, designed. Merle went through it all as gravely as though she were fashioning her burial robe. The increasing paleness on her sweet face was attributed to too much work by all save Aunt Texanna, who persisted in doubtfully shaking her head. "Dis Marser Norris ain't de one fo' dat chile," she repeated time after time when alone. Uncle Tim was somewhat slow in expressing his opinion of the "affair." "But he didn't know if he hadn't rather favor Mr. Leroy in preference to this one Mr. Norris," he kindly intimated to Mrs. Maxwell one evening as they sat together over the smouldering coals in the old-fashioned, wood fireplace—for Mrs. Maxwell would have no other in her sleeping room. And why, when wood was so plentiful? Neither money nor pains did Mrs. Maxwell spare in fashioning her child's trousseau.

Merle Maxwell sat before a window sewing on some dainty creation. Outside was cold and gloomy. The ground was white with snow and still it was falling. Icicles great and small hung from every tree and bough. The howling winds and dark clouds that o'erspread the sky indicated a violent snowstorm, "such as Popularville had not witnessed for years," prophesied Uncle Tim.

Merle, laying aside her work, went to the window and looked out intently. The day was so much in accordance with her thoughts and mood. She peered out more closely. Peeping up over yonder hill an object was perceptible. On and on it came crouching close by the fence as if to avoid the penetrating wind and snow. Wearily the figure picked his footsteps, with slouched hat pulled low over his face. His thin, alpacca dress coat was much worn. A more pitiful, dejected being she never before beheld.

He was turning in at their own gate. She watched him as he plodded up the gravel walk. She hoped her father would ask him in to warm by their bright, glowing fire. She caught a glimpse of his face as he ascended the steps. Horrors, what a face! She shuddered to look upon it. His brow was furrowed with wrinkles. His eyes were red and inflamed. His face looked swollen and dissipated and his hair was long and unkempt. Withal his appearance bespoke a miserable, forlorn creature. Voices sounded in the doorway. Could it be that her father was sending this human being away on a day like this? She rushed out into the spacious hall.

"Father, ask him to warm," she pleaded.

"The odor of strong drink is on his breath now, child, How unfortunate for—"

"But oh, father, see how he shivers! He

is freezing, call him back!" she pleaded as she watched the retreating figure going slowly down the walk.

"Perhaps you are right child. It shall be as you say. Perhaps you had best have Texana prepare him a bite to eat," Mr. Maxwell suggested as he opened the door to let the stranger in.

Back to the kitchen Merle went but not to summon Aunt Texana. With her own hands she lighted a fire in the big range. And in a few moments had prepared a tempting lunch. Her biscuits were as light as any Texana, herself, could have baked. She wondered how he liked eggs best but she should prepare them her father's favorite way. The tea she poured into the cup steaming hot, for that would aid in warming the cold, benumbed being. Ham sandwiches—why had she not thought of them before? It would not long delay the meal. and too, meat was so strengthening. A bountiful piece of gingerbread she placed on the serving tray, for anyone should be fond of Aunt Texana's delicious gingerbread.

Merle Maxwell stood by and watched him

devour the last bite of food prepared. The second cup of tea was offered and accepted, and gulped down as eagerly as the first. She noticed that his hands were small and delicate as if they were strangers to work. He went through the meal without having uttered scarcely a word. When he had finished he thanked both Mr. Maxwell and Merle kindly for their hospitality;then rose to go.

Merle absented her presence from the room, returning in a few moment's time with a discarded but good coat of her father's and bade him accept it. Within a pocket she placed a small testament, which was discovered by the stranger later during the day. The only indication beyond that of an idle wanderer or vagrant was a diamond stud in his shirt bosom. Merle felt contented now that she had done all in her humble way to relieve the suffering of this human being. No doubt somewhere he had a loving sister, mother, and perhaps—a wife, who were daily watching for his home coming.

The stranger, now refreshed in body and mind, went on his weary way. The warm food had worked wonders in reviving his intellectual faculty as well as his body. Once free from the influence of strong liquor, he realized that he had wandered many miles from home, and turned his footsteps in that direction. On and on he plodded the remainder of the day. Night was coming on and the cold wind growing more fierce. The snow had drifted deep, so deep in places that he could scarcely force his way through. He was growing weak from hunger. The bountiful lunch afforded him by Merle Maxwell early in the morning was not sufficient sustenance for the day's journey. His feet were sore from tramping. So tired and cold was he that he could have welcomed a bed of straw.

On he went until his utmost strength was exhausted. Then sinking by the road side searched his pockets for a handkerchief with which to wipe the freezing water from his face. So cold was he now that he had forgotten the comfort of the new coat earlier in the day. What was that? As he drew his numb hand from a pocket he drew with it the little Testament. Leaf by leaf he turned its pages until his eyes rested upon these words: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son that whomsoever believeth in Him might not perish, but have everlasting life." Again and again he strained his eyes to read the sweet message in the gathering darkness. Could this mean him? Was it possible that God so loved him that He gave His only son that he might live? Was this the same God that he had heard read and talked so much in his home, and that she—she had begged him to accept? Was he not one little insignificant part of the world? "Who-so-ever believeth," he repeated over and over again. Could God forgive him of all his wickedness? His entire life illumed before him as vividly as if it all had transpired the previous day. "I do believe," he suddenly wailed. "I shall not perish. I shall live forever." If he could only go to — her, and tell her that he had accepted her Jesus. He would on the morrow. A new expression stole over his countenance. And gripping the little Testament in his hand he crouched beneath the snow for warmth and shelter from the penetrating wind.

Come what might, Felecia Langford's mission went on and so did her tongue. She seemed happy and contented now, that she presided regularly at the little village church organ. She was triumphantly stationed at her post each Sabbath morn. Each moment of Mrs. Langford's life was consumed either in counting her "one and, two and, three and, four and," or, picking out the faults of others. One, it seemed, was as essential to her as the other.

The village club met in an afternoon so soon as the inclement weather permitted. The dependent sex of Popularville were only too glad of an occasion to assemble together, thus getting away from home where they had been shut in for weeks. Recreation and diversion are as necessary to human existence as the food we eat daily. Among the first to make her appearance at the little church on this occasion, as on most others, was Felecia Langford. And with her that same sanctimonious expression and air.

Ere many minutes she removed her seat among a group of ladies. Among whom were: Miss Ogilvie, Aunt Hester Pearson and others. She settled herself, contentedly, in her chair, and addressed the ladies confidently.

"And we are to have a wedding in our town, soon."

"A wedding! who? exclaimed Miss Ogilvie, while others of the group looked wide-eyed and open-mouthed in surprise.

"Miss Merle Maxwell is to be married to Mr. Topleitz," was the informant's reply.

"To Mr.—Topleitz! when?" came the cry from all in the sound of Felecia Langford's voice.

"It is to be soon, I judge, from the way they are sewing. Why they have been preparing her trousseau ever since they returned home early in the fall. For Mrs. Maxwell's negro, Madie, told my washerwoman that she never heard of as many nice things in all her life as Mrs. Maxwell and Merle were making."

"But Mr. Topleitz," sighed Miss Ogilvie.

"Who else could it be?" He spends most of his evenings at the Maxwells'. Besides, didn't he go with her to Camden, New Jersey, last summer? A thing I would never have done," she added sneeringly.

Aunt Hester Pearson had been a silent listener until this last remark. She rubbed her rheumatic joints, straighted up and looked straight into Mrs. Langford's face.

"Felecia," she said, "Mr. Topleitz didn't go to New Jersey with Merle. He went with Mr.

Maxwell. And them two aint going to marry neither. Not that Mr. Topleitz ain't good enough for any girl nearer his own age, but ain't he always spent evenings with Mr. Maxwell who has knowed him since he was a baby? Merle Maxwell ain't never done you nor nobody any harm. If the rest on us would do half as well as her, this here world wouldn't be half so wicked."

"Of course," sneered Mrs. Langford. "But Mrs. Pearson, Merle must have had some influence concerning Mr. Topleitz's decision in going to Camden, for they were conversing together down at the grove not more than a week before they went away. I should not have known but for my girls going there for an hour's play in the shallow water. She was there first and waited awhile for his coming. And when he made his appearance my girls started for home! I should not wonder that Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell went along."

"And do you really think they will not be married, Aunt Hester?" questioned Miss Ogilvie with more meaning than she intended.

"I know they won't Mandie. Why Mr. Topleitz nursed her when she were a tiny babe. If they did see fit to marry it would be no more than many others would do if they could git a chance."

"Perhaps, Mrs. Pearson," suggested Mrs. Langford, "you could give us an account of Miss Merle's Mayfield beau and why he ceased visiting in Popularville."

"Yes," insisted Miss Ogilvie.

"Girls that is no affair of mine. Merle knows and that is sufficient."

"Very probable," scoffed Mrs. Langford.

Just then Brother Havis entered the church and Mrs. Langford rose to greet him.

"How glad we are that you have come, Brother Havis. We were just wishing that you were here to conduct the devotional service. We enjoy your splendid talks so much. Amanda you call the meeting to order while I see what mischief the children are about. I brought those twins this afternoon and they are so meddlesome. Oh, Brother Havis, have you heard that Merle Maxwell and Mr. Topleitz are to be married soon?'.

"No," he exclaimed.

"They are and, oh, I am so glad for them," she assured him.

CHAPTER XVI.

IDA Harwood sat weeping bitterly in her small, two-roomed, dilapidated, cottage home, where she had been taken on the day of her elopement with Joe Murray—with the promise of a better home awaiting her. The incessant rattling of the small windows grated on her nerves, adding, if possible, to her misery. The wind coming up through the cracks of the bare floor, rendered her more uncomfortable. She placed on the dying coals the last stick of wood she had been able to find along the fence ways and hedges. A small, wooden bedstead, supporting a few scant bedclothes, and an old time wardrobe, purchased at half price, and a couple of chairs composed the furniture of her only bedchamber. In the adjoining shed room which served as dining hall and kitchen, stood a homemade table, a much used cooking stove and an addional larder, which had been emptied a day since, constituted its sole equipment. The tumbled down porch and decaying columns added to the dreariness of the place in which the beautiful Ida Murray sat wasting away.

The long months of hardship were telling on her youth. The once plump, rosy cheeked Ida was now thin and pale. From lack of care her mass of dark hair had lost some of its lustre. The once soft, delicate hands, were now tanned and hardened by toil. Hanging on the wall was her mother's portrait, the only article she had taken with her on that memorable night she quitted her father's home. She shuddered to think of that eventful night which had proved destruction to her future life. It seemed that her mother was looking straight into her face chiding her for hasty deed—for which she had so bitterly repented. In wailing tones of anguish she cried out to her mother to come to her rescue, as she sat weeping before her, it seemed. "Oh! how could she longer endure this life?"

Joe Murray, after a brief honeymoon, had fallen back to his old habits of strong drink and idleness. Often he had gone on a drunken debauchery for days, leaving Ida alone to make her own provisions as best she could. This time he had been gone longer than usual. Any day she might be turned out in the cold on account of unpaid rent bills, though it was only a hut. Joe Murray's creditor's pursued him daily. Nowhere was he to be credited. The Murray wealth had merely been an enticement. She could see it all clearly now. Ida had never loved Joe Murray and now her thoughts of him were not above contempt and scorn. What should she do, return to her father and stepmother, whom she had not seen since the night of her elopement? No, never, not proud Ida Harwood.

For moments she sat gazing into vacancy. Then, with lips pressed closely and with determination written on her pale face, she rose. And throwing her mantle about her shoulders she drew from under the bed a traveling case and began to place within it her few belongings. Once she had studied in a nurses' training school, and, now, she should apply for a position as nurse. Yes, she should repay every penny expended on her existence at Wood Hill. Beyond that, Joe Murray's creditors might look to him for recompense. "She would leave ere his return that he might never know her whereabouts," she determined as she took from the wall her mother's portrait. She proceeded to wrap it carefully in one of her own few dresses.

Everything in readiness for her departure she seated herself again for meditation. "How could she make her immediate departure with the ground covered with snow? But the wind had ceased blowing and it seemed as if the sun would break through the dense fog." These were her thoughts as she peered hopefully out at a small window. "What! a group of men at the tumbled down front gate! More creditors. Oh, horrors! Gaston Norris there, and he was coming in too. What should she do? Of all others she could not see him. Pretend she was not there? Anything would be better than facing Gaston Norris under her present surroundings."

Louder and louder sounded the knock on the door. She must answer. With trembling hands she unbolted the door and stood speechless in the presence of the man she had long loved. Gaston Norris stepped back in surprise at her appearance. "Could that be Ida Harwood?" Then remembering his mission stepped inside the comfortless room.

"Ida," he said as he took her thin, wasted hand in his, "it is a sad message I have to bring."

"Those are the only messages I ever receive, Gaston," she said with eyes cast down in shame.

"But Ida," continued Mr. Norris sympathetically, "this is the worst that could be."

"I am prepared for the worst, Gaston, of anything."

"Ida, a stranger was founnd this morning frozen in the deep snow a few miles beyond Mayfield. And I recognized the form to be that of your husband."

"Bring him in," she said as she sank into a chair and wished she could sink through the floor, then out of existence.

He took from his dress coat pocket the little Testament and said: "This was found grasped in his hand."

Ida took it in wonderment. What could it mean? She turned its pages in search of some explanation. He had never before touched a Bible of any form, in the few years that she had known him. There! on the last page, all but blotted out, was the name of Merle Maxwell. "Oh, Merle, Merle," she wailed as she fell prostrate to the floor. As she slowly regained consciousness she heard whispering voices in the room.

"No, no, do not send for my father," she pleaded, "I could not have him come here."

"As she wishes," commanded Mr. Norris. "She has enough already to endure," Ida heard him say. The following day a new grave was made in the little cemetery near Wood Hill.

Ida was now, if possible, more determined to carry out her plans than before. She decidedly refused to return to her father when urged by Mr. Norris. The only information obtainable regarding her future was that she should work for her support. When Norris had done for her all that he could, and she would accept no further assistance, he returned to his home and work and—thoughts of Merle Maxwell. Did Ida Murray remember her father's words? Did she repent of her hasty decision? Does not every child, who disobeys his parents wishes, repent sooner or later? Just as sure do we, who disobey our Heavenly Father, repent sometime, somewhere. But her stepmother deserves the condemnation, you say, and so do I. But should we allow others to drive us to evil doing?

Ida Murray, closely veiled that she might avoid any possible detection, picked her footsteps over the snow covered road. An impossibility to make the journey in a day, even if she were strong. But she knew of a small tavern not more than half the distance of her intended journey where she could spend the night, reaching her destination late in the afternoon of the following day without probability of meeting those who might recognize her form. More and more frequently she was forced to stop for a few moment's rest. But on and on she compelled her footsteps. The thought of a conveyance, but how dare she entertain the thought of such luxury with only the price of a few night's moderate lodging in her possession. And that,—she blushed crimson to think of it—Gaston had placed in her hand the day of his departure from Wood Hill and had insisted upon her accepting more. If she were only spared time and strength, that with her other indebtedness, should be repaid.

With strength entirely exhausted she reached the midway inn just at dusk. She asked for a night's shelter.

"Sorry, Miss, but we're full tonight," responded the stout inn keeper.

"Oh! can you not keep me just this night? I am so tired and weary," she pleaded.

"You do look pegged out," commented Jim Jeffrey. "You wait a minute till I see Maria. Maybe she will let you have her best room, whut she never lets to nobody, being's you are a woman and just about pegged out."

"O, please do! I will pay you for it," entreated Ida.

At the thought of the promised fee, Jim Jeffrey went in search of his wife as fast as his fat limbs could take him.

"Maria," he said in a breath, "a miss at the door wants to stay the night?"

"What is any gal out this late for I'd jest like to know? You knowed every room is packed full Jim Jeffrey, jest as well as I do. There is my only company room; and you have always knowed I ain't going to have no stranger sleeping in my best bed.'

"I done told her we wuz full to the brim Maria, but she begged so awful and said she was so tired and wary. She does look pale and jest about flickered out. And, Maria, she said she could pay for a night's lodging, but you sho wouldn't believe it according to her looks. I done told her you wouldn't let nobody in your best room, but I would see you jest to please her. Maria, you go see her yourself."

"That I can, Jim Jeffrey. I am no chicken-hearted nothing. Are you shore she would pay?" Maria Jeffrey asked over her shoulder as she started for the door, where Ida Murray stood shivering in the cold, hopefully, trustfully waiting. To her those moments seemed hours. Her feet were sore and burning. So tired was she that she was beginning to feel weak and faint. In all her young life she had not walked half that distance in one day.

Mrs. Jeffrey peered out at the window before going to the door. "Law, I jest wonder if she has got any ketchin' disease? She looks powerfully like it," she thought as she opened the door.

"Howdy, Miss."

"Good evening" said Ida as calmly as possible. Can you not spare me a room? Any kind will do," she entreated with chattering teeth.

"Come in, child, you are freezing. Ain't nobody's gal going to freeze at my door, if I do have to let my best room."

"O thank you," Ida said as she dragged herself in at the open door and into Maria Jeffreys's best room, where she fell into the nearest chair.

"Law are you ill, child? You are not going to faint, are you? I hope she ain't got no ketchin' malady," observed the landlady as she quitted the room for a cup of hot tea. "Here child, drink this. It will do you a world o' good. Ida took the proffered cup in a trembling hand and gulped the contents in a few swallows. For that was the first nourishment she had had since early daybreak. The warm tea revived her to such an extent that Mrs. Jeffrey again rushed out of the room, returning in a short time, with another cup of tea and a tray of tempting edibles—the best Ida had enjoyed since leaving Mayfield. She thought that she had never tasted such delicious food before. Law, its the first she's had for weeks, thought her landlady.

After she had eaten and thanked her waitress gratefully, she proceeded to remove her wrap with the assistance of Mrs. Jeffrey.

"Them shoes, child, are wet as water itself. And, law, look at them skirts! If you don't die afore mornin' it'll be a wonder to me."

"Yes," admitted Ida. "I should have had my overshoes. The snow had begun to melt in some places." She looked down at her bedrenched skirts and thought that it would be a blessing to her and others if she should not survive another day.

"Now, if you get to ailin' in the night and need anything jest call me," kindly offered Maria Jeffrey as she quitted the room.

"Oh, thank you, thank you" said Ida. Though she was much revived, her feet were sore and her limbs ached. But before retiring she opened the little Testament which bore Merle Maxwell's inscription and read a few short verses. "That wanderer was nearly froze and starved," Mrs. Jeffrey informed her husband. "But she looks and talks like a plum lady." Not often were Mrs. Jeffrey's hospitalities thus kindly received. She was completely won by Ida's gratefulness and even wished that she had a better room to offer.

The following morning, Jim Jeffrey, as usual, was up early lighting fires and starting the day to rolling. With a merry whistle, and a white apron tied around his short, stout figure, he stood over the meat board pounding a beefsteak when Marie Jeffrey entered the kitchen.

"Law sakes, don't make such a noise, Jim, and let that prodigal gal sleep jest as long as she will. I heard her groaning in the night time. I jest knowed she didn't sleep a wink.'

"I done forgot, Maria," assured good-natured Jim Jeffrey, "but ain't this here beefsteak got to be prepared?"

"Course it has," agreed his wife. "And say, Jim, let's not charge her for her night's keep. She said she wuz willing to pay, but from the looks on her clothes she sho ain't got much chink."

"You are right, Maria. You recollect what the Book says about such things."

"Yes, yes, Jim, I know." And she turned to remove from the cooking stove a pot of boiling beverage.

A tempting breakfast was placed on the table streaming hot, for Jim and Maria Jeffrey were noted cooks.

"Now Jim," said the landlady, "you jest wait on the folks while I light a fire in my best room and see to it that our wanderer wants for nothing. Don't forget that Dr. Whitworth takes his hot water before he eats, Jim," she called back as she disappeared through the door. Dr. Whitworth had been called to the country the previous day and, on account of the disagreeable weather, had put up for the night at the inn.

Scarcely had the inmates of the moderate but comfortable tavern seated themselves at the morning meal ere Mrs. Jeffrey appeared id the doorway excited and agitated.

"Dr. Whitworth, she done lost her talking! She can't say a thing! Them wet shoes and skirts done it! I knowed they would."

"What! Who is it Mrs. Jeffrey?" asked Dr. Whitworth rising from the table.

"Law, I don't know who she is, Dr. Whitworth. She came here last night half starved and nearly froze. She sho was porely clad, but she talked like a sure 'nough lady. And now poor thing, has got a death of cold. You jest come right in and cure her up Dr. Whitworth. And if she can't pay you, I will."

"That is all right about the fee, Mrs. Jeffrey. I shall do all in my power for her." And Dr. Whitworth left an untasted breakfast.

"This way, doctor, right into my best room, but law sakes, I wish I had a better one to offer her. She is such a likely girl."

"Where is her home?" inquired Dr. Whitworth.

"She ain't got none, Doctor, but she said she was on her way to Mayfield to a sanitory or seme big company to get work. Looking after the sick folks I think she said.

"Yes," Dr. Whitworth said as he stepped into the patient's room, followed closely by Mrs. Jeffrey. A glance at the form lying helplessly on the bed and Dr. Whitworth stepped back in astonishment. "Ida Harwood"! he muttered to himself.

"Is she very ill, Doctor?" asked Mrs. Jeffrey alarmed at Dr. Whitworth's maneuvers. If the question was heard it was also evaded. A thorough examination, and a severe attack of tonsilitis was pronounced. Dr. Whitworth prescribed for her. He gave careful directions to Mrs. Jeffrey and then went out to breakfast.

After he had finished his breakfast he went in to sit with his patient. While his willing nurse went in to do justice to her morning meal. He could see that the prescribed medicine had accomplished wonders. And when the propitious time presented itself, he said:

"Ida, my child, why are you here?"

"Oh, Dr. Whitworth, I did not think you would recognize me," she wailed in whispered tones, for she could scarcely speak aloud.

"Ida, I should have known you anywhere. You are the image of your dear mother and more now than ever before. But why are you here?"

“Oh, Dr. Whitworth,” she cried, and then burst into a fit of weeping.

“That is all right, child, tell me all about it” Dr. Whitworth said as he stroked her beautiful hair. Her poor heart had been breaking for some friend to share her trials and as best she could confided all to Dr. Whitworth from the night she quit her father's home for Joe Murray.

“Return to your father,” insisted Dr. Whitworth.

“O I cannot! I must have work.”

“Return to your father and I will give you my patients to nurse as soon as you are strong, if you persist in making your own support.“

“The promised work was too great a temptation to her with scarcely enough in her purse to recompense for her present sustenance. Again her thoughts dwelt on her present position in life. And again she purposed a refusal of Dr. Whitworth's wishes.

Just then footsteps were heard in the hall way.

“Your father, Ida, he said as Mr. Harwood entered the room.

“Oh, father, forgive, forgive,” she wailed in a hoarse whisper. And ere the words were uttered her father held his child in his arms.

CHAPTER XVII.

ANOTHER morning dawned clear and bright save for the bank of dark, violent clouds o'erspreading the western horizon. The ill omen of the morning rainbow, the brightest eyes ever beheld, encircled the western sky. The atmosphere was sultry and oppressive. Scarcely did the breeze move a leaf on tree or bough. The occasional, low, rumbling thunder agitated the minds of the superstitious and the unsuperstitious. Yet Popularville went on the same; and so did Felecia Langford's tongue.

Miss Ogilvie was passing Mrs. Langford's home in great haste. She must call at the butcher's and the grocer's, then hasten home ere the rain and storm, for it was sure to come. She had prophesied that to the servants at first sight of the morning rainbow. What! Mrs. Langford hailing her on a morning like this, when she was in such a hurry, too!

"Whatever can it be, Felecia?" Miss Ogilvie asked as Mrs. Langford came running breathlessly out at her front gate.

"Have you heard, Amanda?" gasped Mrs. Langford.

"Heard that it is going to storm, Felecia?"

"Worse than a storm to some, I venture," asserted Mrs. Langford disappointedly.

"What, Felecia?" The idea of anything being worse than a storm excited Miss Ogilvie beyond measure.

"Amanda, Mr. Topleitz is not going to marry Merle Maxwell." Miss Ogilvie threw her hands up in surprise and Mrs. Langford continued:

"Amanda, it is just as I say. Mr. Topleitz has deceived her. Our plan worked wonderfully. I gave Mahalie the new, red calico and sent her to Mrs. Maxwell's negro, Madie, with careful instructions to find out everything possible. And, Amanda, she came back with the intelligence that Merle was not going to marry Mr. Topleitz. And listen, Amanda, Mahalie says Madie told her that Mr. Topleitz did not go there near so often as he used to. I tell you, Amanda. Mr Topleitz has disappointed her, just like that Mayfield young man did, and they say her health is failing every day. Why, she looks like a walking skeleton, They say it is ill health but I should diagnose her case grief."

"And her trousseau?.' queried Miss Ogilvie.

"Oh, I suppose her finery will keep," commented her informant, "and Amanda, I just can't help believing these rumors are true. And just to prove that Mahalie's statements were true, I offered congratulations to Mr. Topleitz when I met him yesterday afternoon. He said, 'Mrs. Langford, I should sooner think of marrying my own child, had I one.' "

"I always knew that Mr. Topleitz was too old for Merle Maxwell," sweetly agreed Miss Ogilvie.

So interested was she that she had forgotten that she had not yet called at the butcher's and grocer's, until a flash of lightning followed by a loud peal of thunder reminded her of her unfinished errand. At once she took a hasty leave of Mrs. Langford and hurried on her way happier than she had been for months —since Felecia Langford had informed her of Mr. Topleitz's approaching marriage to Merle. The clouds looked threatening, yet Miss Ogilvie persisted in "her own selection of edibles for her table."

The morning was advancing and so were the clouds. The old village clock was slowly striking the noon hour, as if warning the people of some impending danger. The wind had changed its course and was coming fiercely from the southwest. There appeared a violent disturbance in the elements. The atmosphere was chilly and disagreeable. Low on the ground, not a great way from the village, a dark smoke seemed to be rolling and boiling in anger.

The wind was coming in great puffs when

Miss Ogilvie ran into Mrs. Langford's house almost breathless.

"Felecia, I knew it was coming."

"Close that door quick, Amanda," greeted Mrs. Langford in excitement. The rain was now coming in gushes; the lightning was coming more forcibly, followed by peals of thunder that seemed to shake the entire earth. Such commotion had never before been witnessed in Popularville or its vicinity. Miss Ogilvie was sorely distressed because of not reaching home ere the storm came. Mahalie would let her last chicken drown. She was so thankful that it was not her day off to wash for Mrs. Langford. She did wonder if she would think to close the latticed windows. In case she didn't every window light would be shattered by the hail that was now coming in great stones. The day had turned into night—the darkest ever known to human being. It was so dark that men hurrying in from their morning work could scarcely find their way home, even if they could battle against the wind, hail and rain.

In the Langford home, as well as all other homes of Popularville, everything was excitement. Miss Ogilvie was going from room to room and from window to window, wondering if her home and possessions were being blown away. Adam Langford, little less excited than she. was engaged in propping doors and trying to quiet his wife, who stood wringing her hands and pleading for mercy. The cries of little Felecia and Verbenie, who were clutching to their frantic mother's dress, added pity to the scene. Master William and Willard siezed this propitious opportunity for viewing the contents of Miss Ogilvie's basket of provisions. They were doing justice to a jar of lemon butter when detected by its owner, who at once siezed the basket and conveyed it to the room in which were Mr. and Mrs. Langford.

The house was shaking fearfully. Here and there a window light was missing. Timber from outbuildings was flying in the air. A scream from Mrs. Langford brought Miss Ogilvie from an adjoining room where she was endeavoring to force in a vacant window pane, a sofa cushion, against the impetuous wind. She threw her hands up in terror when she beheld Mrs. Langford in a heap on the floor and Adam Langford bending over her.

"Whatever has happened?" she gasped.

"Thunder-struck, I—I think," informed the excited Mr. Langford.

"Lightning-struck, you mean."

"Ye-yes," he said, as the two lifted her to the bed.

Miss Ogilvie took from the medicine closet pain-oleum, camphor, mustard ointment, liniment, and, in her excitement, a bottle of lily toilet water, applying alternately. Adam Langford started as if a sudden thought had siezed him.

"A doctor, Amanda!"

"In this tempest, Mr. Langford?"

Mr. Langford looked out. "Why, Miss Amanda, the wind is ceasing, and the hail and rain have ceased entirely. Surely a doctor would not mind the water and mud."

"Just as you prefer, Mr. Langford, although Felecia is much revived and a doctor's fee might as well be saved,"

"Felecia would never forgive me for not calling a doctor, Miss Amanda. Besides it might be best."

"Use your best judgment, Mr. Langford." And Adam Langford called the village physician. Mrs. Langford yawned, opened her eyes and looked about frantically.

"Her breathing was natural," Miss Ogilvie thought. Perhaps she had not been lightning struck, but had only fainted through fear.

The clouds had disappeared, displaying a clear, blue sky, with the bright sun shining forth in all its radiance. The birds were out singing a merry roundelay when the village doctor arrived. He pronounced Mrs. Langford's case a severe shock by lightning. Again the patient yawned, opened her eyes and beheld the family physician by her bedside.

"Oh, Doctor, am I going to die?"

"No, no, Mrs. Langford, you will be quite strong in a few days."

"Yes, I know that I am going to die," she wailed. "There is Amanda and a house full of people. Oh, I am not fit to die. Save me, doctor, save me. I cannot die now. Oh, Father, forgive me; I have sinned! I have sinned! I have sinned against everybody! Merle Maxwell, where is she? Send for her at once. I must tell her that I have lied. Oh, beg of her to come. I know she is a true christian character, and I have wronged her. And Aunt Hester Pearson. Send for her and Mr. Topleitz and Brother Havis, and everybody. I have slandered them everyone. Oh, will they never come?" Miss Ogilvie looked alarmingly at Mr. Langford, then the doctor.

"Send at once," he commanded.

And messages that Mrs. Langford was dying and to come at once were sent to Merle Maxwell, Aunt Hester Pearson, Brother Havis and Mr. Topleitz.

In less than an hour they were at her bedside in utter amazement.

"Oh, Merle," she wailed at first sight of the one she had so unjustly wronged. "I have talked about you; I have lied on you; I have wronged you. Forgive me. oh, forgive me

They think I am losing my reason, but I am more rational than ever before. Every word I said about Mr. Leroy was an untruth. He has never been married. Oh, it is all a lie! I have wronged you in the church and out. I cannot tell you all I have said and done. But it is all clearly before me. Forgive me, oh forgive me." As soon as she could seize an opportunity Merle Maxwell said in simple words:

"Mrs. Langford I forgive you fully of every deed said or done."

Turning to the others Mrs. Langford continued: "I have talked about every one of you. Forgive me." Following Merle's example each of them assured her that she was forgiven.

Miss Ogilvie had sunk into the nearest chair and remained there bewildered, until she followed Mrs. Langford and the Doctor to the door.

"Is she going to die?" Adam Langford asked, frightened almost out of his wits.

"No, she will be much better now. This is better medicine than I could possibly prescribe." And the village doctor walked out.

Chapter XVIII.

DERRIS Leroy sat in his room alone. Gaston Norris' trip to Camden, New Jersey had proved a successful one. The invention was completed and perfected. The attorneys had been appointed by Leroy. Claims for a patent had been filed. And nothing to do but the long waiting of returns

Leroy took up his hat, walked out to the florist's, and selected a beautiful bouquet of fern and pink and white carnations. Then he went out to the city necropolis and, with his own hands, arranged them on his mother's grave. The sweet flowers of spring time were distributing their fragrant perfumes and he remembered his mother's ardent love for the beautiful flowers. He thought of their walks together in his sister's flower garden. And how she had admired each flower and plant. So much was she like Merle Maxwell.

These memories brought back other memories. His intense loneliness weighed heavily upon his mind. He consulted his watch. Another hour he had to spare this evening. He hesitated a moment; the temptation was too great. He had tried hard of late to keep away from the home that he had built for Merle Maxwell, but this evening something impelled him on. And there he went as quickly as steps could take him. Beautiful indeed was the place in its robe of green with cape jasamines budding forth. For countless times he walked through the beautiful flowers, stooping here and there to pluck a weed that had dared to make its appearance. Tomorrow he should send a gardener to care for each plant and flower. He plucked a nosegay of sweet peas and returned to the place he now called home.

He was met by his light-hearted niece and nephew. Idell Worthington, who was no longer a baby, but a beautiful girl of ten summers, reached out her hand for a sweet pea.

"Just one, Uncle Derris, and I shall tell you something."

"A sweet kiss thrown in and you may have them all," he teased.

Idell at once offered her rosy lips for a kiss and at the same time reached for the flowers. Leroy placed them in her slender white hand.

"Now, what have you to tell?" he asked.

"It isn't so very pleasant, Uncle Derris. Perhaps you had rather not hear.

"Oh, it cannot be so very, very bad Remember your promise," he reminded her.

"Uncle Derris, mother is real angry with you. I heard her tell Miss Parker that she was."

"And what offense has your mother charged me with this time?"

"Oh, she wanted you to come home and accompany Miss Parker home. Father had to go," she added regretfully.

"Now, that is not so bad is it? But let us go in; the dew is beginning to fall. And the children clung to his hands as they went into the library.

"Derris," said Mrs. Worthington, "I wish to talk with you so soon as I have taken the babies into the nursery." Do children ever cease to be babies to mothers? Mrs. Worthington returned to the library and to her brother:

"My dear brother, why do you not wed some sweet dispositioned girl—Eloise Parker for instance?"

"Annibel, I do not care for Miss Parker. Therefore, I shall not think of asking her to become my wife. Love is sacred to me and I shall never marry any save the girl that I know I love."

"Oh, Derris, I am so disappointed in you, for Eloise is such a dear, sweet girl and—and she cares for you. And your life is such a lonely one."

"I admit, Annibel, that my life is a lonely solitary one, and that Miss Parker is very amiable. But I can neither care for her nor be more to her than a friend. And, Annibel, I wish you would discourage her thoughts of me beyond that of a friend."

"Just as you wish, Derris, though it was not intended for anyone to live a life of loneliness."

"For some it was not, Annibel. but it is far better for one to live alone than to bring unhappiness into two lives by a marriage without love."

Perhaps you have never tried to love, Derris. You have always been so engrossed in your work that I wonder sometimes that you ever give pleasure a thought."

"My work and memories of past days are all I have, Annibel. And please do not feel disappointed that I cannot think differently of Miss Parker."

"Of course, dear brother, I am concerned in your happiness and hope that ere long you meet the one intended for you."

"Thank you sister, but that is not very probable. I shall now retire to my room."

"Good night, brother," Mrs. Worthington called as he closed the door behind him.

Out in the hall he met Mr. Worthington

coming in. "Derris, has Mrs. Worthington retired to her room?"

"No, she is yet in the library awaiting your return."

"I hurried home, not knowing that you would be here. You know that Annibel never likes being alone with the servants in an evening."

"Oh, she has been amusing herself by chiding me," Leroy remarked jokingly as he went to his room.

On his desk was a bulk of forgotten mail And drawing a chair up, he selected the important letters putting the others aside. One he viewed critically—a letter from E. L. Latney, his old friend whom he had not heard from in months. He broke its seal first and read the contents, a smile playing over his studious face. Latney married and in Jacksonville, Fla., on a honeymoon. He hoped that he would ever be happy. And he surely should be if his bride was as beautiful and worthy as pictured in the message just read. He wrote congratulations, marveling who would be the next to congratulate, when Williams entered with a card announcing Mr. Norris's presence.

"I will be down presently, Williams. Show him in the drawing room."

Leroy greeted his friend cordially. "Just happened to be passing and dropped in to tell you of my approaching marriage," said Norris.

"Am glad for you, old boy," and without asking who or where, Leroy congratulated him, adding laughingly, "I am in the receiving line this afternoon."

"How is that," asked Norris.

"A letter from our old friend Latney, informing me that he is married and in Jacksonville, Fla., on his honeymoon."

"I am glad for him," assured the elated Mr. Norris. "Am in a hurry, will see you again, Derris."

"But when is your wedding to be, Gaston?"

"Early in May," he called back, as he went out at the door.

Ida Harwood had returned home at the earnest request of her father. And after weeks of careful nursing was regaining her usual health. But there was sadness in her eyes, and she yearned for work somewhere. None of her former girl friends, not even Vera Whitworth, seemed to care for her now. Everything seemed so different, even more than she had anticipated. Her stepmother was less kind than before, when her father was absent. In his presence she was kind and considerate of Ida's wishes. Would Dr. Whitworth never pronounce her strong enough to work? Oh! those unpaid debts staring her in the face continually!

One morning she sat in the drawing room weeping bitterly. The last straw of hope had been broken. Her life seemed worse than useless. She sat with her head in hands weeping convulsively when Dr. Whitworth was ushered into her presence. She started from the room but Dr. Whitworth barred the doorway.

"Ida, child, it is you with whom I wish to speak, Be seated. She made an effort to dry her tear stained eyes and sank into her chair. The doctor took her hand in his, "Ida, my child, this will never do."

"Oh, Dr. Whitworth, she cried, "did human ever before suffer as I have suffered?"

"Yes, Ida, many, many. though you have never known. but listen, I have tidings for you."

"What, Dr. Whitworth, tell me quickly!"

"Ida it is this: Early this morning I had a telegram from Popularville requesting me to send the best nurse Mayfield afforded. Will you go?"

"Will I go! Yes, gladly, gladly."

"You know where the place is, Ida?"

"Oh, yes, the dearest girl in the world resides there."

"But listen, Ida, first you are to be calm and natural. These bursts of tears are not to be manifested there. It is a serious case you understand?"

"Yes, yes."

"Do you understand nursing perfectly, Ida?"

"I have my diploma,"—and she rose to go for it.

"That is not necessary, Ida."

"When shall I go, doctor?"

"At once, or as soon as possible. Can you be ready for the next train?"

"Yes. Oh, Dr. Whitworth, how can I thank you?"

"That is all right child. Do not fail to do your best."

"You may depend on me, Dr. Whitworth."

"Now, no more of those unforbidden tears," he said as he patted her shoulder. And she ran to her room to make ready, with a smile on her tear stained face. The first smile that had crossed her lovely face since her return to Mayfield.

Chapter XIX.

MERLE Maxwell, alone in her room, nervously turned the pages of the calendar hanging on the wall. Only three weeks until her wedding day. For nights she had not closed her eyes in sleep. She was, as Felecia Langford had said, little more than a walking skeleton. The dark circles surrounding her soft, brown eyes added to their sadness. The roses from her lips and cheeks had faded entirely these last few weeks. The dark, brown curls hanging loosely about her sad face only enhanced its beauty. Her slender, girlish form now looked thin and wasted. She had never fully believed the slanderous rumors against Leroy, but, oh, she had permitted doubts to creep into her thoughts of him. And now, when it was too late, Felecia Langford had confessed and explained all. Yet another obstacle: Why had he never written or explained concerning that unfortunate letter? Perhaps in that, too, there has been a mistake. Why, oh why had

"Too late, too late."

she promised to wed Gaston Norris against her wishes. It seemed that some unknown power was clutching at her heartstrings. "Too late, too late," she wailed in whispered tones. All necessary arrangements were made. Her trousseau was completed save one more day's shopping of accessories. The little ivory frame containing the likeness of Leroy had not yet been removed from its resting place on her dressing table. This she had purposed doing upon entering her room. Instead she kneeled before it with burning tears streaming down her pale cheeks. And with arms stretched heavenward, she pleaded, "Help us, oh God —guard us dear Jesus, and keep us always, always."

And thus she was found several moments later with eyes rivited unconsciously on the little ivory frame. Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell placed the unconscious form of their child on the bed, and dispatched Mose for the physician. In less than thirty minutes he was delivered at the front gate. For an hour the kind old physician sat by her bedside. Then, after giving careful directions, was followed down the stairway by the anxious mother and father. They need not ask the question on their hearts, for Dr. Kent turned to them as he reached the hallway:

"A fever that needs careful attention."

"A nurse, Dr. Kent?" asked the thoughtful mother.

"Better a nurse, Mrs. Maxwell."

"Wire for the best in Mayfield at once, doctor," demanded Mr. Maxwell.

"You may expect the best nurse attainable this afternoon. Good morning."

"Good morning. Doctor."

For days and nights Merle Maxwell was delirous. The fever came and went, leaving her weaker and weaker. At times she lay for minutes staring the white capped nurse in the face. Again she tossed on her bed for hours, mumbling broken sentences about her wedding or Gaston Norris, but more often calling Derris Leroy in piteous tones. Ida had been faithful to her charge. Little did she dream that she was being conveyed to the home of Merle Maxwell until she was ushered into her presence. And, oh, she was so glad now that she had the opportunity of coming and attending the bedside of one whom she loved as a sister. She bravely suppressed every thought, concerning her own unhappy life, and devoted each thought to the care of her patient. None of the Maxwell household recognized her which was all the better for her. A few instances she thought Merle recognized her. And in her deliriums she called incessantly for her. Not a moment had Ida been off duty. Although Dr. Kent advised a portion of rest each day. Not one dose of medicine did she fail to give at the appointed hour.

At length,the crisis came. All night Dr. Kent and Ida sat by her bedside ministering in every possible way. In the adjoining room anxiously awaited the expectant parents, with a host of friends and loved ones. Oh! those moments of waiting. Scarcely could there be found in all the little village a woman or child who had not called to inquire of "Miss Merle," and to bring some little token of love. Even Felecia Langford and Amanda Ogilvie. two new made women, came in all sincerity. And Aunt Hester Pearson, with a nosegay of violets, had walked the full mile to see her, afterwards suffering a week with her "rheumatiz." Little Verbenie and Felecia Langford, now so happy that their mother loved "Miss Merle," came to offer their respects and love, lingering long outside the door for permission to see her "just once."

The critical moment had passed. Merle opened her large eyes in wonderment and rested them on her faithful nurse.

"Ida, you here?'.

"Yes, Merle."

"Where are mother, father, and—Gaston? Oh, I must see him at once."

"Listen, Merle, Gaston Norris has been waiting in yonder room since morning to see you. You may see him on the morrow if you are much better. But you must not talk tonight." Ida laid her hand on the pale trembling lips and soon she fell into a peaceful slumber.

Ida softly closed the door behind Dr. Kent as he stepped into the adjoining room. "The crisis has passed and Miss Maxwell lives," he announced quietly. And turning to Mrs. Maxwell who, with tears of thankfulness and gratitude streaming down her sweet face, had started from her chair said: "Mrs. Maxwell you must retire to your room for rest. This has been a trying experience for you. And please do not rest any uneasiness, for your child has a competent nurse and, if not excited, will recover." And to the waiting friends he said, "If you need go, go quietly." Then Dr. Kent went out, for he, too, was in need of rest.

Noislessly Popularville departed for their homes, leaving the Maxwell home wrapped in peaceful silence of the early morning hours. Madam Murray, as Ida was known to all save Merle, resumed her seat to watch her convalescent patient, She gazed long into Merle's face wishing that it was she who was ill in her stead. She should not care to recover. Nothing had she while Merle had everything —Gaston Norris, and to her that meant every thing.

The morning meal over, Ida went down and informed Mr. Norris that one of Merle's first wishes after regaining consciousness was that she might see him. She promised him that later in the morning he should see her for a few moments, "if Merle really cared to see him," she added jestingly. Ida permitted Norris to accompany her as far as the bed-chamber adjoining Merle's, promising to leave the door ajar that he might catch her first words upon her awakeing.

Not long had they to wait for Merle stirred, opened her soft brown eyes and gazed inquiringly on the white apron and cap before her.

"Ida, why are you here? When did you come?"

"I came here to nurse you through your illness, Merle, and oh, I am so glad you are better."

"Have I been very ill?"

"Yes, very ill, Merle. But you are so much better that you are going to be well again."

"But where is he—your husband, Ida?"

"Mine is a sad story, Merle. Would that I had never wedded!" Then, remembering her promise to Dr. Whitworth, checked her tears and said, "you are not strong enough to hear yet."

"Oh, yes, it will do me good to hear you talk. Go on, Ida."

"Promise not to stir and I shall tell you all."

"I promise Ida." And Gaston Norris, sitting within the adjacent room, heard Ida Murray pour out her sad story from beginning to that present day. Merle lay motionless drinking in the true words.

When Ida had finished she cried out:

"I am sorry, so sorry, Ida! But now hear hear my sad story."

"Hush" whispered Ida. "Not now, wait until you are stronger. I should not have burdened you so soon with my sad experience."

"Yes, now, Ida," Merle pleaded. I must tell somebody. Listen, Ida, I shall never recover until I have told some one." Ida sat thoughtfully for a moment, then consented. Merle placed her thin, pale, hands in those of Ida Harwood and looked straight into her sad face.

"Ida," she said, "I cannot marry Gaston Norris."

"And why not,Merle?"

"Oh, I do not love him. I have never loved him. I cannot, I cannot. "Ida," she whispered, "I have asked Jesus to help me. I have been pleading all the days that I might be spared that wedding day with him. Oh, Ida, my whole soul rebels."

Gaston Norris had started from his chair at the beginning of Merle's words and now stood in the doorway with head bowed low. And ere either Madam Murray or Merle were aware he stood by the bedside looking into the pale face.

"Merle, why can you never care for me? Is there another?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes, yes. Oh, Gaston, have you never known that I love—him? And Ida, had you never guessed?" she cried as she stretched forth her hands for the little ivory frame on the dressing table, where her mother had taken it from her grasp and replaced it the day she was taken ill. "Forgive, forgive," she wailed and fell back exhausted on her pillow.

"All too true and plain," Gaston Norris muttered under breath as he beheld the true likeness of Derris Leroy. Then, with the courage of a true man, Norris took the small, white hand of Merle Maxwell in his own and said:

"Tis I who should seek forgiveness. I have wrought all this upon you. My conscience has long condemned me."

Merle stared blankly for a moment, then

looked straight into his face and said:

"Gaston, were my life at stake I could not say other than I have said. I cannot force myself."

"I know," he said. Forgive me." He held her hand for a brief moment, then quit the room, leaving Ida in amazement.

Later in the day, urged by both Dr. Kent and Merle, Ida went out taking her first walk since arriving at Popularville. She had chosen the path leading out towards the little village. Unmindful of the beautiful trees nature had shaded the path with, she was meditating upon the events of the previous morning, when joined by Norris. When they had walked the length of the shaded path in silence and she was turning to retrace her footsteps he said:

"Ida will you marry me after—after this?"

Ida started in surprise. "Would you wed Joe Murray's widow?" she asked.

"Yes," he said as he seized both her hands in his.

"But Gaston, my position in life and—and those unpaid debts?"

"Never mind your position in life, and those debts—they shall be settled for. After all, Ida, four lives will be made happy instead of one. Hurry home, girlie," he called back as he started off to make the homeward train. Ida, beaming with joy, ran in to impart the glad tidings to Merle.

CHAPTER XX.

AS soon as Merle was pronounced out of danger Madam Murray pleaded leave to return home, leaving Mrs. Maxwell as sole nurse over her child.

Whatever possessed Mose to hitch the ponies to the front paling fence? A thing he had never before done. No one, not even he, knew. The only explanation he had to offer Aunt Texanna, who rebuked him soundly, was: "He had done hurried to the drug sto'e to get that description fulfilled fo' Miss Merle so she'd hurry and git well." While he was yet giving this explanation, Madie ran in at the back door excited and breathless.

"Mose, dem ponies done to'e down a yard ob dem palings and de mail box wid it!"

In less than thirty minutes Mose had the ponies in their stalls. And with hammer and nails was repairing the demolished fence. With trembling hands he replaced the old-fashioned mail box and proceeded to secure it with tremendous strokes of the hammer upon the heads of the great spikes. What was that? Slipping from beneath the sheet of lining in the lid of the post box was an old stained letter. Mose picked it up. What? Another! And he picked up the second. Then he shook the box, vigorously, to make sure there were no more. He viewed the letters, closely. The postmarks were entirly effaced. "M-i-s-s M-e-r-l-e," he spelled out. And without trying to decipher the remainder of the address, he ran straight to Texanna with the news. Her chubby hands went up in surprise.

"Gi'e me them letters Mose, and you go right on wid yo' bizziness," Aunt Texanna said as she snatched the soiled, weather stained messages from his hand.

She went immediately up to Merle's room and knocked gently on the door. Mrs. Maxwell, thinking perhaps it was Dr. Kent, responded at once. She was no less surprised than the servant had been at the recovery of the letters.

"But not yet, Texanna," Mrs. Maxwell said. "You know Dr. Kent said that she must be spared all excitement. Leave them in the library and perhaps in a few days she can have them." Then she softly closed the door on Aunt Texanna, who was sorely disappointed. Those were "her baby's" letters and she was so glad, for somehow Aunt Texanna had not lost faith in her prayers. "Besides, it was none of Dr. Kent's business," she mused. She obeyed the command without a word. But, with a determined expression on her wrinkled face, returned to her work.

Later, while Mrs. Maxwell was out in the kitchen preparing an appetizing stew for her ill child, Aunt Texanna slipped two yellow letters from the library table into her dress bosom. She went cautiously out into the hall and up the stairway. Once she immagined that footsteps followed her and she pressed her hands to her bosom and the secreted letters. Straight she went to her "baby's" room and entered unceremoniously. Merle started at the look of uneasiness written on the old servant's face. Aunt Texanna quieted her fears with:

"Hush, honey, yo' ole auntie brung yo' something." With a shaky hand she brought forth the letters. "Don't be scairt, baby, and don't let yo' ma know 'cause she said Dr. Kent wouldn't like for you to be scairt now."

"Be seated, Auntie, and tell me how you happened to have those letters in your possession."

The old darky seated herself by the bedside and told Merle the whole story. First, of Mose going to the village to have the prescription filled. Then of his tying the ponies to the front fence. And how they had torn the palings off the front fence and upset the mail box. Of how she had scolded; of the finding of the letters and how glad she was now that it had all happened. Merle stared in silence. Then with trembling hands broke the seals of the letters. She happened to read Derris Leroy's explanation first, followed by that of Gaston Norris. In a moment the whole truth flashed upon her.

"Oh, Auntie, my prayers are being answered and I am so happy."

"My prayers are being answered too, honey. I knowed it would do you good to read 'em," old Texanna said, pointing to the letters.

"Thank you, Auntie, thank you."

"Yo' ma will be comin' with the stew soon, baby." And the old servant went down as cautiously as she had come.

Again and again Merle read the letters, then the dates again. Oh! it was all so plain now. Norris? Could it be the same Norris that she had so nearly married? Yes. She knew the meaning now of his words when he had said that he had wrought all this upon her. But where was Derris Leroy now? Was he married? Mrs. Maxwell came in with the nourishment on a silver serving tray.

"Oh, mother, do hurry! I think I shall starve!"

"What?" her mother asked in surprise, for they had scarcely been able to persuade her to touch food. Each passing day found Merle improving in health and regaining her usual strength. For several days she had been permitted to sit up at intervals, a few moments longer each day. Yes, she had walked down to dinner once. And she had been promised a short stroll this evening in the garden among the beautiful flowers, provided she would wear something warm for she was yet thin and easily chilled. What should she don? She shuddered when her mother mentioned one of her new gowns of her trousseau,

"The red velvet, mother, is just the thing for a cool evening. Besides, I havn't worn it since—for a long time."

"Your selection is a wise one."

After Merle had finished her toilet and her mother had placed a mantle about her shoulders, she walked out among the flowers admiring each in turn. Then turned her footsteps toward the little, old, picket gate and stood beneath a giant magnolia, which was now white with blossoms. Ah, was she not thinking of another evening when she had stood here, but not alone?

She had turned to retrace her steps when a voice from behind called gently:

"Merle, Merle!"

And in an instant Derris Leroy was by her side with both of her hands seized in his.

"Derris," Merle whispered and began an explanation.

"I know all, Merle," said Leroy kindly.

"Have you seen—did Ida and Gaston tell you?"

"Yes, I have seen Ida and Gaston and I know all."

"But these?" she asked holding forth the two unfortunate envelopes that she had not yet suffered to leave her possession. Leroy took them in his hands and in the gathering twilight scanned their pages.

"When?" he inquired as the truth began to dawn upon him.

"Just since my illness, Derris."

"Let's go in, girlie, the gentle breezes are too much for you yet. You are shivering." And Leroy drew her mantle close about her shoulders, just as he had done on a previous evening.

"Ida and Gaston," she whispered, "are they—?"

"Yes, Ida and Gaston were married a week since. And oh, they are so happy—Ida at least."

"I am so glad, glad, glad!" Merle said.

"Merle," Leroy said. "it is enough to know that we have ever loved and remained true to each other, but I have a little surprise yet to add to our happiness."

"How can we be happier? But what is it, Derris?"

"To-day I received a patent for an invention and sold same for fifty thousand dollars."

"What! An invention!"

"We shall have much to talk about little girl," Leroy whispered as he helped her up the steps of her dear old home.

Two weeks later a wedding day dawned bright and beautiful. Evening came on without the appearance of a cloud to mar the beauty of the clear, blue sky. From every window of the old home shone a brilliant light. Each room within itself was a garden of flowers. Down the hall and into the spacious living room came the bride and bridegroom on that lovely Wednesday evening. They stood beneath an arch of beautiful roses for the month was June—while brother Havis pronounced them husband and wife, in the presence of half of Popularville. Felecia Langford, with her slippered foot, beat the "one and, two and, three and, four and." Amanda Ogilvie and Aunt Hester Pearson, too, with her "rheumatiz" were there. Besides these, there were: Ida and Gaston Norris, Lucy, Maud, Nell, Vera—and even Eloise Parker, at the request of Leroy. Mr. Topleitz was first to take Merle in his arms and bless her. While Uncle

Tim and Mrs. Maxwell looked on with tears glistening in their eyes.

A beautiful picture indeed was Merle in all white, with a string of tinted pearls encircling her fair neck and a picture hat o'ershadowing her smiling face, as she threw from the stairway her bridal bouquet of cape jasamines which fell straight into the arms of Eloise Parker. And Mr. Topleitz stood close by.

Down at the little picket gate stood friends and loved ones, wishing Derris Leroy and the fair Merle God speed. Merle pushed her way through the crowd to Aunt Texanna who stood in the rear with a corner of her checked apron to her eyes. She placed a kiss on the worthy old servant's brow as she said:

"Oh! Auntie, I am so happy!"

"My prayers am answered, baby," the old darkey said, as she tenderly and lovingly embraced the woman that she had nursed from babyhood. Then, with love beaming from her sweet face, Merle went back to her husband, who, tenderly, handed her in the waiting taxi.

Spring had passed and the month of roses, "with sweet thoughts of Him who trod a lonely path on earth, suffered on the Cross, but rose triumphant, and now intercedes for us on earth," had begun.

THE END.

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